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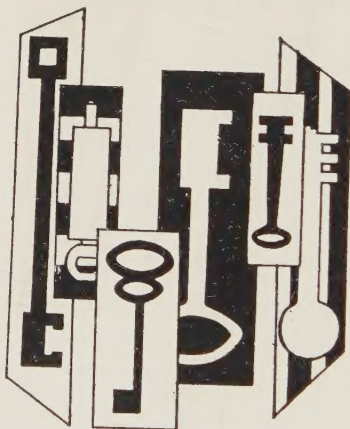
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FAINT PERFUME

By ZONA GALE

FAINT PERFUME—A NOVEL

MISS LULU BETT—A NOVEL

MISS LULU BETT—A PLAY

FAINT PERFUME

BY
ZONA GALE

AUTHOR OF
"MISS LULU BETT"



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PART I

LEDA

FAINT PERFUME

I

A WET autumn night, a low lighted house, wheels on the soaked gravel, the open door, and Leda Perrin in her father's arms.

He was surprised to have her telegram? No, for it had seemed to him every day that she would come back. Then he *had* been lonesome! No, only often thinking that she might walk in at the gate.

"And now you wonder why I came, don't you, dear? You think it's to tell you that I'm going to be married?"

"Married!" said John Perrin. "Why, you're only twenty-four. Twenty-six. Well, yes—twenty-seven."

"But it's not that," said Leda, and demanded supper lest he should ask her what it was, though for days she had been schooling

herself to tell him. While she supped and sat with him she bore without sign the pain cursing the right arm, the right shoulder, and now driving her home for a year of rest. She could not tell him on this first night.

Instead she told him about New York, her year of work in the magazine office, the after hours when she had been shut in her room writing.

"A novel. I couldn't bear to write scraps. A novel about wicked folk who are good."

"She's young yet," John Perrin thought. "It takes longer to write about good folk who are wicked." Aloud he asked: "What's wicked?"

"Something you ministers teach us about," his daughter said.

When the pain became intolerable she rose and wandered about the room: shelves of tooled leather; old silhouettes of her father's Cornish family; bits of faïence gathered by her dead London mother; embroidery and copper brought by a grandfather in the Indian consular service before the mutiny;

the world. How was she to spend a year here in Prospect parsonage and forbidden to touch her pen?

She said to her father: "You look happy."

"You're here."

"No, another sort."

Perrin had imagined himself to be veiling his small triumph. Not that the triumph was certain, but he had made an investment represented to him as both sound and moral. He and Leda might be at the avenue of that year of theirs in Greece, with a bit of excavating.

He said: "We'll save what I have to tell you. Now, what have you to tell me?"

"We'll save that, too."

At breakfast she asked: "How are the Crumbs?"

Her father looked guilty: "I don't know when I've seen them."

"Cousins make one such a hypocrite. Why can't we have a row with the Crumbs and never recover?"

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"Aren't you any farther on than that?"

"No, I'm not, really, but I know how to pretend to be."

"Aren't you any farther on than *that*?"

"Oh, a little."

"Suppose," severely, "we have the Crumbs for dinner to-night."

"Our first night!"

"To discipline our souls."

Her eyes livened. "Aren't you any farther on than that? Let's ask them, by all means. But we're both hypocrites."

He sighed: "I suppose so."

After breakfast he confessed to his investment. His bright slant look betrayed his attempt to carry it off casually: Thirty thousand, it might be. Any day now, they told him. Copper.

"Men whom you know?"

"Not intimately. But enough." He looked at her sweetly. "I thought we might sail before Christmas." Fire sparkled through the fine white ash of his face. He showed her his maps. She looked and asked:

"Copper where?"

"Montana. And Crete—would you like to swing down through Crete?"

"Crete, by all means. You feel it's an investment that——"

"Quite guilt-edged. They say——" He told her what they said. "Sicily is an old dream of mine." He talked of his old dream. He added: "Don't say anything of this to the Crumbs, of course—if they come to-night. Orrin would want to advise me."

"You didn't have anybody's advice, dear, did you?"

"No more than you do on what you should put into your stories." His delicacy veiled his mild triumph.

The Crumbs were dining at the Perrins'. The Crumbs were cousins less by the grace of God than by casualty; cousins by concatenation; double cousins, since a Crumb had married a Crumb. The mellow room received them.

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"Well!" said Mrs. Truman Crumb, and kissed Leda one might say, verbally.

"Well, Cousin!" cried Tweet Crumb—verbal too.

"Here's the city girl!" burst from Orrin, husband of Tweet. He did not kiss Leda. He looked as if he thought of it and refrained on account of ethical considerations.

Leda and her father were standing. Berta would return in a moment to announce dinner, but the Crumbs sat down, oblivious. They could initiate anything.

"Thin," said Orrin. "She's thin."

They inspected Leda. But Tweet was not able really to inspect anything out of relation to herself. Perhaps to such an extent did she feel the solidarity of the race that she considered every problem of others by referring it to her own.

"I wish you'd tell me how you do it," she said, and dipped her glance to her own excessive endowments.

"Isn't Pearl coming?" Leda asked.

"Pearl overdid," said Mrs. Truman

Crumb. This seemed to require no elaboration. Pearl dwindled.

"And Grandfather Crumb?"

"You didn't expect *him*?"

"Why not?"

"We never thought to mention it to him. Did anybody?" Nobody had mentioned it to him.

Berta came, said "Dinner" with enormous distinctness and withdrew, running. Leda's apology was her low laughter, but this laughter the Crumbs did not even note. Did not hostesses always laugh? Especially in leading the way to the dining-room?

The parsonage dining-room the Perrins had paneled to the ceiling in dark oak. The light was table candles and a mound of flowers.

Orrin Crumb demanded: "Aren't we civilized?" He entered upon the occasion as if he were physically stepping into something. As the clean smiling fellow approached his chair you no less than saw that he was a traveling salesman filled with *esprit de corps*.

It would not matter what the *corps* was, the *esprit* would be there.

Tweet cried: "Mama. I do wish we could make our table look elegant like Cousin Leda's."

Orrin said: "You do when we have company"; but she perceived no misstep and continued to regard the linen.

"I always thought our table looked good enough for anybody," said Mrs. Truman Crumb. "And Mr. Crumb always thought so, too." Beneath her thin dying hair with its lively wave, her arched heavy eyebrows pensively lifted. You understood that Mr. Crumb was gone.

Orrin Crumb said to his host: "Well, and how are spiritual affairs progressing?" His bright-eyed alertness, his moist parted lips, his faint sweet odor of soap all became invested with his desire to be at home on his host's own plane. It was "How's the market?" and no more than that.

A light candle appeared to flicker in the shell of John Perrin's face.

"Not very steady," he gravely replied. "The bulls eating the lambs alive—oh, it's bears, isn't it?"

The vibrations of Orrin Crumb's laughter were petty convulsions. He said inarticulate things.

"And the Gideonites?" Mr. Perrin asked. He asked it with the playful intonation of Established Church good-naturedly countenancing the little ethical excursions of a lay world.

Orrin's convolutions flattened, his eyes grew round with the recollection of his spiritual life. He began to talk of the convention to be held in Prospect in March by that religious order of traveling salesmen—the Gideonites. Orrin was a Gideonite. And now as he talked his face was beautifully lighted. You saw his bright inmost point of light.

When they were served a certain table tension relaxed. Leda said: "Now you must post me up on the news at your house," and the hour, that tight bud, unfolded.

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"What do you think," Tweet demanded, "we're going to do—Orrin and I?"

So delicately did Leda reflect Tweet's animation that one momentarily captured the exquisiteness of abstract human response.

"To adopt," said Tweet, "a little girl."

Tweet said that she was so much alone and if anything should happen to Mama. . . . The tone was lowered, a tenderness came to Tweet's eyes. Mama, perfect in her *savoir faire* when death was delicately referred to as a personal matter—Mama, with lowered eyes, plied her fork. The moment hung there black, but it went on like any moment. And Tweet said she must have somebody to make clothes for. "Every time I see a fashion plate I feel restless." She wanted a child old enough to have curls. "And then we both want a little one." At this, momentarily, her face was that of a Madonna. Conscious. Unconscious, too.

"But she has none in view yet," Mama ventured. You saw Mama's bright hope that maybe none would come into view.

"Every woman ought to have a child," Orrin uttered, and Tweet lifted her look to them all. Suffering was in her face. She was acknowledging herself to have failed. This fair thick being was divined to have her agonies. But she said: "There's the sweetest dimity for a little girl of six in Split and Ponder's window. I wish I could find a little girl of six. It's such a cute age."

"Little girls of six," said the Gideonite, his voice swelling down his period, "do not grow on every bush." The elderly figure pleased him and he smiled about.

Mrs. Crumb now said without resilience: "We're going to have a little boy of six in the house all Winter. I should think that's enough that's six."

"Richmiel is coming," Tweet announced. "We had a cable."

At this news, so casually delivered, that Tweet's younger sister was returning from Europe, Leda felt a shock of pleasure. She had not forgotten that day of Richmiel's wedding, nine years before, or forgotten the

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stranger, Barnaby Powers, the groom, prowling about the rooms and devouring Richmiel with his eyes.

Tweet twitched aside the curtain from that romance. "Nine years—but nine years with Barnaby must have seemed like fifty."

John Perrin spoke warmly: "Powers is one of the most charming men I've ever met. Distinguished, delightful."

"Oh," said Tweet tolerantly, "I know his name's in print lots, but, goodness!"

"Tweet!" her mother protested four tones down.

"It's all in the family," Tweet defended, rich in intonation. In Tweet's air of assumption stood, it might be, the tribal myth, a naked myth.

"I'd like to know what it's done to Reesha," Tweet went on, "living like that—he at his eternal lecturing, never going a place with her." Tweet's lips made a deprecatory indrawn sound at the corner. "Reesha's had a funny life." She rehearsed the funny life:

"No better than a widow. No better than a maiden lady."

"But he *is* handsome," Mama conceded. "Not as handsome as your father." Again the eyebrow was a pensive arch.

"Perhaps you can make something of Barnaby, Cousin Leda," said Tweet. "You like funny folks."

"Not always," Leda told her drily. She chided herself for her secret interpretation, and hugged it too. She had been listening as if listening were the positive, the vital; and it was as if the talk of the Crumbs were the negative, the inert, the dead.

They all went into the study, Mama hunched, as if she had recently been cut from crumpled paper, Tweet with rhythmic thigh and breast, her head poised like a parakeet's.

The mellow room received them among the paler colors of fire, the wine, the maroon, the blue.

Tweet roamed there.

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"Mama," she said, "isn't this a refined room?"

Leda smelled the odor of home, an odor like clean woolen. The hall clock with incredible solemnity uttered a wrong hour. Her father in his study below tapped the fender with the tongs. The memory of the Crumbs was in the room like a gas. She thought: "Every day and night for a year," and in the dark she divined in her home a kind of dying.

"Every day and night for a year." Yet within the month nothing of all this remained.

There was a dropping away of her father after a fortnight of illness, a comfortable illness during which he had continued to plan. Then the headlines said that he was no more. "John Perrin Is No More." The words carried nothing of the essence of the event. *He was no more.*

Three days before his death a letter came concerning the sweeping away of all in his

preposterous unadvised risk. Leda said nothing, laid the letter aside, sat with him in his high-ceiled room.

"Crete—we must see Crete by moonlight, Leda."

"Crete. By moonlight. . . ."

"There'll be something to feel such as we've only felt in books. Something very jolly."

"O yes—jolly. . . ."

"And Thessaly. Driving round in something, driving slowly—it must be slowly!—with a volume of Theocritus. Leda, look out my red Theocritus and put it with my things."

"Your things?"

"I've some shirts and things ready in the window-seat."

She found a pile of underthings and a dozen volumes, ready. She brought the Theocritus.

He died with the perfection of his dream unimpaired. He died believing her well and able and that he had cleverly provided for

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her. There was an instant when he knew that he was dying. He murmured: "You'll be all right"; lifted that last banner.

A brother clergyman said: "Lean hard—lean hard on the Saviour, Perrin." And Perrin answered proudly: "My daughter will never want," and died. Thirty years of spiritual leadership, and he clean and strong; but his period had done this for him: that he crossed the valley or the river or whatever the topographical unit may be, paternally telling ghostly guineas for Leda.

Her grief was intolerably sharpened by her hurt at his thwarting. Three parts of the dark of death seemed to her to be frustration. Besides her grief and the torturing pain in her arm, that which she most clearly remembered of the time was the smell of the badly-cured leather of the funeral taxi and the sickening swinging of its window tassel.

When all had been discharged it was found that Perrin had left his daughter, Prospect told it, without a penny. Without a penny and unable to work for a year. Leda said

this over. It sounded like a representation by one who is trying to make matters out worse than they are.

She packed her belongings. She had no plan. There were Cornish kinsmen, but she remembered them as intent throaty folk who did not understand her idioms and who confused her with their vowels. In any case it was impossible to appeal to them. To appeal to friends was unimaginable. Leda stored the manse furniture, said that she was not certain what she should do.

From the first Prospect had assumed a solution which to her had not presented itself: her cousins, the Crumbs.

The Crumbs did not count themselves with the Starrets or the Lanes of Prospect. That is to say, either a Starret or a Lane might have been pall-bearer to a Crumb, but a Crumb pall-bearer to a Starret or a Lane, never.

At noon dinner in the fortnight following the death of John Perrin, Tweet was late.

It was assumed that she was at the parsonage, and Mrs. Truman Crumb hoped that Berta would have a good dinner. Tweet hadn't eaten much breakfast. Hadn't Orrin noticed that? That was funny, but then, men never noticed anything. Hadn't Orrin noticed that men never notice anything?

"I've noticed it," said Grandfather Crumb. He was eating at the end of the table and he now lifted his head and looked about at everybody, but nobody looked at him.

"Don't forget your dried corn, Grandfather," said Mrs. Crumb, and looked at the corn.

"Tweet's a busy little bee," said Orrin. "She'll swoop down presently to browse," untroubled by the image of a bee browsing.

"Tweet eats too much anyhow. She's fat," said Pearl. Pearl was there, over-ripe sweetness, a lovely listless sister, a too mel-low fruit.

"Fat!" Mrs. Crumb indignantly turned upon her youngest. "How can you say so?"

Her figure is very much what mine was, her age."

Pearl's lips repeated "Too fat," without a sound.

"Let's not get to jangling over that," Orrin cried. He was so pinkly shaved, looked out with such evident pupils that you simply could not shatter his expectation.

"'Jangling!'" Mrs. Crumb did quote the word reproachfully. "What a word, Orrin."

"Isn't it!" said Pearl resentfully.

"Danged fine word!" said Grandfather Crumb loudly, and laughed at his plate.

"Eat up your dried corn, Grandfather," said Mrs. Crumb.

Tweet entered.

"There's my little woman," cried Orrin.

By obscure processes Mrs. Truman Crumb's welcome to her daughter was blemished by indignation. She said: "Well! Where have you been staying till after it came time for them to get their dinner?"

Tweet was hurried, hungry, and began: "I can't say that I was aware——" She

was of those who in irritation resort to Latin derivatives. Also, at such times she gave to the alpha its full breadth.

"Upon my word, jangling the first thing," cried Orrin. Waiting for the maid Nettie to bring in dessert he sang a loud bar—it was so that he took the situation by the throat and throttled it to decorum.

Shortly Tweet became more affable, digestion augmenting her breeding: said, "I've something to tell you," and let them guess, her lips holding one dimple stationary and she saying "No, no, no," inflected up. At last it came: "I think I've found her." She told them about an orphan of Prospect, who was seven, homeless, and had curls. "Can't you see her, going ahead of us up the aisle, Orrin? Orrin, what do you think?"

Her eyes went to the eyes of Orrin: What did they think?

"Ah," said the Gideonite, "I'm very much afraid——"

Tweet's look confessed a like fear.

Leda

“——that I sympathize with this to an unwise extent.”

Tweet relaxed and lifted bright reassured eyes.

“But——” Orrin went on, and once more his wife dangled her reaction. “We shall have to see,” he judicially concluded.

His Tweet leaned back in her chair, as pretty a piece of thoughtfulness as ever was poised by a word. They should have to see.

At supper Orrin came home with the news that Leda hadn't a penny. Prospect said so, and Prospect knew about her right arm. “They say——”

Grandfather Crumb was polishing a quarter on his knee. His gray hair curled about his neck, his splendid nose stooped to his task. He spoke out in his loud voice, without looking up: “Instead of that orphing, why don't you ask the girl to come and bide here?”

Out of the depths of the heart of Mrs. Truman Crumb her voice spoke: “No. Leda

wouldn't come here. We're not good enough for her."

"Mama—the idea!" Tweet's pride was trampled. "I'd like to know if we don't go with the nicest folks in Prospect."

There it was.

The Gideonite spoke out: "Don't jangle. And it isn't a question of the orphan, I should hope. If the girl hasn't got a home, that settles it, doesn't it? We'll ask her to come here." He was unaware of the faintest nobility, as if his words were the casual secretion of a certain racial nobility of which the good fellow unconsciously partook. He added: "But for Lord's sakes, stop your jangling," and left the room. This prejudice against "jangling" seemed more consciously noble, a recent and a Gideonitish thing.

The three women stared at one another: *Leda there!*

"It always seems as if she saw right straight through you," Tweet said feebly. "I declare I don't know——"

Leda

Grandfather Crumb looked up from his quarter.

"She's a good girl," he said positively. "She's better than our tribe." He rose with difficulty and precision, balanced, walked. "She looks like——"

"Like Grandma did?" Mrs. Crumb proposed.

"No," said Grandfather Crumb.

It was to be seen that there had been a tremendous life going on in him too.

II

LEDA had accepted, had arrived, her aversion to using the Crumbs absorbed by her aversion to borrowing with no plan to repay. She slept deeply, awakened to bewilderment, found herself still assailed by the events of the previous evening: her arrival; the articulateness of the Crumbs, who had even seized upon her bodily in authentic impulses of tenderness which had assumed her responsive tear, had been blankly taken aback when it did not flow: Cry, Cousin Leda, cry your heart out. *We'll understand.*

She was, on this first morning, the first to reach the dining-room save for the maid, Nettie, who smiled as if she knew that she ought not, being the maid, and vanished. "They're mostly late," she did volunteer, speaking with the extreme fervor peculiar to apprentices. There was not a parenthet-

ical impulse in her. She had no faculty for murmurs.

A gigantic red poinsettia was hung as a shade against the central lamp. This monstrous blossom stared at Leda, an unrestrained expression of the inexpressible. It was like the eye of the house.

The Crumbs entered, relaxed, as if in them the night were not yet spent: The three women first, in little sacques. And of the meeting they made no ceremony, but entered intimately upon talk.

"Well!" said Tweet. "Going down town early, are you, Cousin Leda?"

Leda said no, that she was not going down town.

"Please don't feel you have to put on all that for us!" Tweet cried, at Leda's admirable skirt and blouse.

"No, my dear," said Mrs. Truman Crumb, "you'll find us very easy-going. We wear and let wear, in the mornings."

"That makes me think," said Tweet. "I dreamed——"

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It was a longish dream and ramified. It was interrupted by the arrival of the Gideonite. He, too, gave no good morning, but the sheer breeziness of his manner made of his entrance a little ceremony. "My stars!" he said as he took his place. He was all animal well-being, attacked Pearl, accused her of having by her plate a love-letter, winked, demanded: "Who is he this time? Duke Envers again?" and was a happy boy.

Tweet said: "Honey, do you really have to go in the morning?" He told her fondly that she always asked that every time he started on his trip. And their eyes clung in a vital tenderness which left an observer shaken.

Now he felt that something was due to the cousin, so he turned upon her, dropped his voice, his manner, dipped his head: Was she making herself at home? Well, she just must.

They all joined him: Cousin Leda, you will feel you're one of us? And, Blood is thicker than water!

Leda

Leda sat there, her look going from one to another. She felt shorn of all her tentacles. Horns, horns were required. "You mustn't think of me," she said earnestly, and they said, Well, they should hope they would think of her. The scarlet eye of the poinsettia was like a fifth Crumb, insisting.

The latch of the porch door clicked, and there was Grandfather Crumb. No one gave him attention, and he leaned in the doorway, fumbling in his pocket. He was clean, collarless, shaven. His gray hair rolled thickly about his ears. He came down the room and laid by Leda's plate an apple. With her thanks she smiled up at him; but he did not look at her. No one else said anything to him. He went to the kitchen, still fumbling in his pocket. You knew that nothing was there, that this was his way of preserving his dignity, the dignity of having preoccupations of his own.

"He never eats breakfast," Mrs. Truman Crumb explained before the door closed. "He keeps apples in his room."

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"He won't like giving up his room," Tweet observed. She gave a bright slant look as if she had touched a button and something might whirr. Something did whirr:

"Why should he give up his room?" Orrin demanded.

"For Barnaby. Grandfather can go in the trunk room."

"My grandfather," said Orrin, "shall do nothing of the sort."

"But you know when they were coming that other time when they didn't come, Reesha wrote particularly for Barnaby to have the attic room where it's quiet, with a fireplace."

"If your sister's husband thinks he's going to upset our whole household so he can have quiet, he's fooled."

"But, Orrin——"

"Enough!" shouted the Gideonite.

Leda found herself trembling, said: "Please. Let someone have the room you've given me. I should do quite well in the trunk room——"

"You'll stay where you are," said Orrin. "I'm not going to have things turned upside down for that man."

"I don't know what Barnaby will say——" Tweet feebly kept it up.

"Since when are you more tender of him than of me?"

"Orrin! How absurd! They're our guests——"

"They invited themselves."

"Orrin! It's my sister." Now a note of tears.

"It's my grandfather, that old man. Grandfather," he called, and went toward the pantry.

Grandfather reappeared. He was eating an apple which he continued to examine.

"Grandfather," said the Gideonite, "you'll keep your room, understand. Nobody is to put you out of it."

Grandfather Crumb chewed leisurely and swallowed. "I brought m' things down when the dispatch come. I brought 'em down to the trunk room."

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"You'll take them back to-day."

"No."

"You move back to your own room to-day."

Grandfather Crumb took an enormous bite from his apple, breaking the bite with a cracking sound. "I'll stay where I am," he said mildly. "You try to boss me and I'll have you across my knee," and left the room.

Pearl laughed abominably. Tweet's lip moved, but her eyes were anxious. All depended on the Gideonite. If he, too, would laugh. . . . No; he drew down his brow and gave his tight lips a lifted line; said: "Grandfather's in his second childhood."

Pearl giggled: "Second father-hood."

"I," said the Gideonite, "will discuss this with him alone."

He departed. Someone mentioned cleaning the silver. Covertly Leda, still trembling, looked at them. They were preparing to go about their day as if nothing had happened.

Leda

Now the cousins laid upon her warm straying hands, twined arms about her arms and with her left the room.

The Crumbs' living-room was the home of articles preserved out of sentiment for a sentiment no longer enduring. On the evening of Leda's first day in the house, the Gideonite lay in that room upon the "davenport." His air of extravagant idleness confessed that this was his last night at home. Next morning he would take to the road again, a gypsy-sounding occupation but with no gypsying.

"Take me with you this time," Tweet entreated from a basket chair cradling her baby plumpness.

"My mouse must stay at home like a good mouse."

She sighed. "Orrin, you really think we won't take that little girl? This time?"

"Best wait a bit. There'll always be orphans," he soothed her. So he had safely soothed her by a procession of them. Chil-

dren he liked, but he liked, too, his comfortable home routine.

"But I do miss you, and if I had somebody to make dresses for——"

He knew that something was the matter with this, but all that he could achieve was a general attack: "What a ridiculous charity."

"But I'd like that just the way you like Bible classes."

"Yours is vanity."

"So is yours—partly."

"Since when is religion vanity?"

She said that he was proud of being known as a "first-rate Bible scholar" in the towns which he "made" for "the Sabbath." He said: "If that's your idea, when a man tries to serve his Master!" She said that she would like to know who it was that was as proud as a peacock of having given a hundred Bibles, personally, to be put in hotel rooms. He looked away with an air of suffering. She threw herself on his breast with: Darling! Couldn't his mouse joke?

Mrs. Crumb and Pearl, who had been calling and had been prevailed on to stay somewhere for supper, now entered in apparel of such an air of best that they seemed to be wearing not clothes but merchandise. They detailed news. They discussed the falling-out of two presumably joined by God, the irregular doings of a daughter of a best family and the ending of a life. And their prevailing emotion was: What'd he hang himself in the cellar for, with that trap door for her to lift him up through?

In the midst of this came a telegram. Richmiel had landed, was staying over briefly, would wire her hour of arrival.

"Wouldn't you think Barnaby would do the telegraphing?" Tweet demanded. "Orrin would."

"My part," Mama observed, "I think Barnaby is a cross and we might as well bear him for ours."

Pearl said: "Reesha'll have clothes that'll make ours look like gunnysacks."

"Better take care of what we have got,

then," said Mama, and went away to remove the merchandise and, as her custom was, reappeared in "something else" to spend the evening.

Meanwhile Leda had entered, and Orrin said: "Oh, by the way, Cousin Leda, don't you go off walking by yourself the way you did this morning. You take Pearl."

On a road of alien beauty—snow fields webbed with shadow, horizons banked with blue—Leda had that morning marveled that even the imagined company of a Crumb could cut off the splendor. Now she replied: "Pearl might rebel." And in terror super-added: "I like going alone."

"Oh, now, Cousin Leda," Tweet cried, "surely that's an affectation."

"Why should I affect that?"

"Oh, people do, without meaning to. I know *I* do."

"What," inquired the Gideonite, "do you affect, mouse?"

She cried: "To love you!" And he seized her.

"Seriously, Cousin Leda," he resumed, "you must get about more—as soon as appearances permit. Ever skate?"

"Why—years ago."

"Dance?"

"Years ago."

"See? We must get you out of that. We'll have you active as a cricket. Active as a cricket."

She had imagined that he amused her. She was mortified at her mounting irritation.

"Why on earth should I be as active as a cricket?"

At the absurdity of such a doubt he laughed indulgently. "You and Tweet and Pearl must get up some romps here. My sisters used to chase one another all over the house."

"I'm not up to much, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense! You just haven't had anybody to liven you up, and you must——" he remembered and dipped his forehead, brows raised "——when the mourning is

over. As a family, you'll find us fairly lively."

She murmured: "I'll try not to fail you too often;" thought that if she could sit there silent they would understand her distaste; but the temptation to be courteous overcame her.

Pearl passed. To illustrate his pretty boast the Gideonite rose, hurled a pillow at her, ran. She was after him. Tweet followed. They might all be heard in the next room.

Leda went upstairs. In the upper passage the gas was lighted—a high burner which left the place raw and whitish. Grandfather Crumb was traversing the passage. He did not look up, but she heard him saying something. It was:

"Don't they raise the hell, hell, hell."

She switched off her lamp. Their method of entering her room, she had that day found, was informally to follow up a perfunctory tap. If the door was locked they called anxiously and tenderly to know if she was ill:

Well then, let me in, Cousin Leda. It's only me. Now she sat quiet in the darkness with an animal sense of covert. She expected their voices: What you in there all by yourself for, Exclusive?

On the wall of her room here at the Crumbs' she had set that day the portrait of her father who looked like Dante; the Cornish silhouettes, delicate profiles, slender throats; and about her sounded familiar rumors of the distant and the past. All these she had seen sink into the wall-paper, be devoured by the air of that room. Now she opened a window to the odor of snow, the thin wash of starlight, the stillness of the village street. But there entered no shy besieging sense of reality, like the surge of love, in which she was accustomed to meet the open air not as watcher but as participant. It was as if this, too, were devoured by the air of that room. She sat there, empty. She became sharply aware of the pressure of pain in shoulder and arm.

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Outside her door there was a scuffling, a knock, and the latch was tried. It came:

“What you in there for in the dark, Exclusive?”

She said: “I have gone to bed”; and thought: “Already there is my first sin.”

The Powers’ seemed in no haste to arrive. Friends made in Europe were, by her brief accounts, besieging Richmiel in New York. Besides being brief she was vague. But it was confidently expected that they would reach Prospect for the holidays, and in them centered the Crumbs’ Christmas preparation: Gifts for Richmiel commensurate with the importance of her European experience, gifts for the little Oliver whom they had never seen—not a difficult matter: Boys of six were boys of six, they seemed to say. For Barnaby they decided on a book—an expensive book. Pearl said that it ought to be something really deep like those Papa used to read. Pressed to know what Papa used to read, they remembered books on

bugs. But did Barnaby care for bugs? With a rare flash of self-consciousness they laughed at themselves. All the same, they were in earnest.

Two days before Christmas the Gideonite returned, entered the house at evening, his arms encompassing bundles, and he in the combined *esprit* of a homecoming and of the imminence of Christmas. He and Tweet clung together in the passage, she unmindful of the snowy coat which she clasped; and, inner nature for an instant manifest, arcs of silver may have played about them.

Mama went about with a light shining inside, and it was as if some secret umbilical cord drew her to the telephone every time that it rang; and as if much of her existence went on outside her body, in Richmiel's body. The whole house was pulsing on its basement; and in the hope of concentrating on the feast which should be Richmiel's welcome, the kitchen ran in ripples. On Christmas eve the message came. Richmiel telegraphed that she had intended to surprise

them, but an invitation "important for Oliver" would delay them over New Year's. She sent, she said, a million kisses.

At midnight the Gideonite stood in his purple bathrobe outside his door and chanted the great middle-class ballad:

" 'Twas the night before Christmas, and
all through the house——"

—chanted it from beginning to end. For was it not Christmas eve?

When he had ceased there came from down the passage a rough thin singing:

" 'Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht.' "

It was interrupted by Mama's cry of: Mercy on us. Grandfather'll take his death. And Orrin's hearty: Yes, well. Better go back to bed now, Grandfather.

Leda heard the trunk-room door close on Grandfather Crumb and his carol.

Yet the time brought its own air. At the dining table on Christmas morning this was determinate. It was felt to be Christmas.

Friction diminished, frankness suffered some holiday inhibition. With many a loud My stars, the Gileonite distributed the gifts, objects manifesting the travail of manufacturers. The women were gentle, open to jests, resented nothing, even showed happy tears at one another's delight. "Oh, Cousin Leda, how good that you have a family of your very own to be with this Christmas—isn't it?" The red eye of the poinsettia presided over all.

Toward noon Leda found Mama crying in the kitchen. She was basting the turkey and crying—for Richmiel. And when Leda, whose way of comfort was to be casual, to give the grieving one an excuse to leave her turmoil and become spectator, when Leda, instead of saying, "Cousin—don't!" did say merely: "What a fine turkey!"—it was not that Mama could not have rebounded. Merely, Mama did not wish to be interrupted at her relaxation. As she basted, she wept the more.

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Grandfather Crumb sat whittling shavings for the range, and he said: "They'll be here soon, lass," and the years which had run together so lightly took back their own rank.

"It isn't Reesha's fault, Mama, you can be sure of that," Tweet said from the dining-room; "it's Barnaby. He wants to stay in New York for something—that's all it is." She came into view in a saffron blouse. "He's a selfish thing," said she. "Reesha's always written us that."

"You mean when he left her alone in the Alps all last summer?" Mama inquired, basting, unconscious that her inflections were painting upon the room her child, Richmiel, seated solitary in snows. "You know she wrote me Barnaby wasn't giving her money enough to dress on," she cried, and banged the oven door. "I shall go crazy!"

"Little more, you mean," muttered Grandfather Crumb, and whittled.

Pearl came down the back stairs and entered with: "What's the use of getting

Cousin Leda all prejudiced before he gets here? That's what I say."

And Tweet spoke nakedly: "I guess Cousin Leda knows none of us here have much time for Barnaby. Anyway, that's the truth."

"She might as well know," said Mama, "that he wanted Reesha to come home and stay awhile. That was five years ago. Reesha wouldn't do it. She said her place was with him. And it was."

"Why was it?" demanded Grandfather Crumb loudly.

There was a moment's silence.

"Why was it?" he repeated, and added, "I bet it wasn't, if the murder was out."

"Whittle your shavings, Grandfather," said Mama.

Leda was escaping when the Gideonite came booming: "Where's everybody?" heard the subject of the orgy, said: "Leave the poor foreign cuss alone, can't you?" and added that Barnaby, he was a highbrow and knew it, too—which seemed to double the de-

fection. They fell on Barnaby and tore him, the Gideonite protesting feebly. They sat in the comfortable kitchen, with its odor of roast turkey and its litter of the Christmas dinner preparation, and they tore Barnaby. But to one another they continued in a holiday gentleness.

In her room, nursing arm and shoulder, Leda brought back Barnaby Powers as she had seen him in that house: That day of snow, banked windows, laden boughs, chilly rooms; the high emphasis of the wedding guests; and the man, burning among them. She saw him intent, silent, a hand covering his mouth, and he watching for Richmiel. Through the ceremony he had stood looking down at her as if the guests were not; afterward had stared at them as if he wondered how they came there. Into the carriage his arms had swung Richmiel. Leda had never forgotten him, that exquisite being, caught unaware, there before them all, like any yokel with his Joan. In the nine years he had remained to her a presence. She had

found his papers in the English reviews, had looked deeply at his face on the magazine page, his large fine hand shadowing his eyes and in those eyes a great fire. He and Richmiel! Richmiel whose body had seemed nine-tenths of her being. What by now had been his tortures? The finer of the two, he was the one who would have been harmed. Leda tried to image him there among the Crumbs, the grave smouldering presence. What would they say to him?

. . . Now she heard the voices of the Crumbs. Tweet had been taking her tonic, and Mama demanded: "What spoon did you use, Tweet?"

"One of the good ones."

"Why did you take one of the good ones?"

"Why not?"

"Yes, and when company comes what have I to give them? Old rusty spoons. Poorhouse spoons. I should think you might——"

"I think that's pretty small, Mama."

In Mama's mutter Leda knew that there

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had come back, veritable and glowing, her early days when silver spoons were few and prized; that it was in fact those early days themselves which Tweet might have shared. But Tweet said only that it was pretty small. And Leda saw that she herself might become unable to re-value Mama's mutters and Tweet's shrill cries and Orrin's outbursts. That the Crumbs were upon her, like facts.

"Very well. Very well. If I can't have a spoon to take my tonic, Orrin'll buy me half a dozen. I really do think, Mama——"

From head to foot Leda burned with a great fire, as if her body became a blazing signal for help.

"Somebody come. Barnaby Powers! Barnaby Powers!"

III

THE train which Richmiel did finally name was due in early morning. The Prospect guests usually arrived in this express, and Prospect etiquette demanded an escort. There was something Oriental in the village solicitude; Biblical.

Leda, Tweet and the Gideonite reached the station in darkness. Under the high forlorn incandescent lamp on the uncovered platform the Gideonite crunched back and forth in the snow, and in the darkness his *esprit* was operative. *He* was used to early trains, he should hope.

"I don't see why you need to brag about it," Tweet said crossly.

Leda was silent, happy. Across the Prospect marshes there was approaching a certain being. The sky was white with stars; the dry cold bore a quality of resistance, of caress.

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The thundering "Through" carried special coaches, sealed like sarcophagi and placarded "Ballet Russe." It was a marvel, all those fairy feet in Prospect.

"Some theatrical troupe or other," the Gideonite observed.

So long was Richmiel in alighting that they had given her up. The Prospect way was to be at the coach door ready to pop out on the instant. Richmiel's ways were other: Many wraps, many belongings, a clutter of little circumstances. "One side!" cried the porter to those who had come to meet her. Even under that one incandescent bulb there outrayed from Richmiel the shops of Europe. Her clear tones sounded:

"Where is the black bag? Is that the tan bag? Have you the little bag, porter? Where is Oliver?"

She kissed wonderfully, a perfume stealing from her through the cold—the perfume of a closed room, warm and waiting for a rendezvous.

She and Oliver stood on the platform

alone. No one else had alighted from the train. It was Tweet who cried out: "Where's Barnaby?"

Where was he? The doors of the vestibules were closed, the train began to move.

"Didn't he come?" Tweet's high voice pressed it.

"I'll give you an account of him later," Richmiel said smoothly. "No. He didn't come."

Leda was stupefied, some factor of her being was withdrawn. In her disappointment she felt young and angry. But he was coming, he must be coming——"

"But isn't he coming?" the Gideonite tried to boom above the roll of wheels.

They heard Richmiel say Please, please, that her teeth were chattering. They moved down the platform. Tweet and Orrin, mystified, yet retained their high sense of climax and tried to say that it didn't seem possible that she was there, after all these years. But this Richmiel passed over in favor of an account of the porter who had not called them

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in time; or blackened Oliver's boots. And, "Oh, yes," she said, "here's Oliver."

The little boy accepted the moment with a beautiful earnestness. He did his part with a certain air of faithfulness. You saw that if he failed now at any point he would remember the failure with smarting. They descended steps, and there came Pearl, running limply, like a badly wound toy. She said never so much. The rattling bus drove by them—no Prospect visitor ever took it because it insisted upon going first to its hotel. It would have occurred to no one in the town to have out a "livery" at that hour. Richmiel said, Oh, were they going to walk? Oh, they were? Richmiel treading the Prospect sidewalks at dawn was anomalous, a Fortuny figure in a canvas by Ridgway Knight.

Now the air was thinning and the little houses emerged pleasantly, wrapped in their frail safety of wall and lock. The Gideonite rallied and began interpreting. As he passed these houses marriages, elections,

deaths flowed from him. Tremendous waste, tremendous pity crying in the street below a faint horn or two of triumph. Once those others had believed themselves to be Prospect. Richmiel was saying Yes, she remembered, and they didn't think she could have left her bead bag in the train, did they?

The whole way Leda said hardly a word.

Then the Crumb house. Lights in all the windows. And a straight smoke, a blue muezzin, announcing something.

The street door swung open and Mama prevailed.

At breakfast the confusion was indescribable. Not a sentence was finished.

Since it was five o'clock instead of eight, a new method was required. Mama was in a black taffeta dressing sacque sacred to Sunday mornings. Tweet and Pearl wore their pendants. In homage to the unique a high green glass dish of preserves stood on the table. The tempo of the household was accelerated, its rhythm changed.

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Among them sat Richmiel. She was flaxen, silken, slow, as thick and white as a Borgia; a product of Prospect cooled in a fancy mold.

She would take nothing but coffee and oranges, and over this the Crumbs were as much exercised as over the non-appearance of Barnaby; rather more. At any reference to him Richmiel lifted brows and dropped lids, both inscrutable. She turned the talk to Leda, whom she was genuinely glad to see. "You have an air of town," she said to her, and covertly Tweet and Pearl looked at each other: Had not they an air of town? "Everyone in America has an air of town now," Richmiel added. "But you——" She continued to regard her. Leda looked up dumbly. Was this cool blonde powerful woman going to make things better or worse in that house? And where was her husband?

The most charming one at the table was Oliver. He was a bit frightened, and his gravity and discretion held all the appeal of

the ephemeral. When he was acquainted he was going to burst into Boy. But now he took his dishes so seriously, played so painstakingly at his little rôle. Even upon the assaults of the Gideonite ("Well, well, well, well. *What* a big boy!") he was polite, though disconcertingly grave.

"Iz-zunt he darling?" Tweet demanded. "Aren't you darling, darling?" and fixed him with a bright look.

Manifestly upset by this unfamiliar challenge, Oliver said regretfully: "I don't know that game."

The Crumbs laughed like savages, and the child looked pierced by the intolerable anguish of having failed.

"I want to adopt a little child," Tweet was going on. "Can't I adopt you?"

"My father wouldn't like that," said Oliver. At mention of his father his face was beautifully quickened. But he looked about covertly lest they should be laughing again.

"You'd just better let me adopt you while

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you're here." Tweet put her hands upon him as if he had fur.

Richmiel cried alertly: "Perhaps I'll leave Oliver with you after a bit and run out to California. I'm afraid this climate—after the Riviera. . . ."

By this observation the family was thrown into dumb disorder. Their looks said, Leave us? After the nine years? But the Gideonite remarked that California was the garden spot of the world.

When Mama led the way to the living-room, Leda escaped. She went through the pantry, and in the kitchen sat Grandfather Crumb eating apples. She would have liked to say to him untruthfully: "They've been asking for you in there," but this his quietude forbade. They smiled at each other, and she went on; but, her hand on the stair door, she heard him chuckle. "Going to fly to the cat hole," he affirmed. As she entered her room she saw that it had resumed its habit of death where that morning

had pulsed the physical waves of her expectation.

At fifteen to six, while everyone belowstairs waited uncertainly about, Mama seated herself with an air of leisure and complacency.

"Sit down all," she said, and rocked. "You'll want a nap after a while, but we can't have our first visit spoiled, can we?"

Fifteen to six. Richmiel was wan and relaxed. You were certain that she would sweep aside every consideration and go to her bed. But she hesitated, and to her handsome impassive face came a light of haunting beauty.

"One of you take Oliver to his room, will you?" she said to her sisters. "And let me have Mama?"

She drew Mama to the couch. In some way she slipped her splendid figure into the little woman's arms. Mrs. Crumb now seemed to enter upon an accession of life, of size, of manner. Some secret self came

through of whom her daily life knew but one projection.

“Reesha . . .”

“Yes, dear.”

“What is it? Tell Mama.”

Richmiel was crying quietly. “Love me, love me.”

“Mama does love you, Reesha. She’s thought about you every hour she’s been awake for these nine years.”

The disparity in the proportion of her own thought of Mama may have tightened Richmiel’s arms about her now.

“But something’s wrong. Mama can see that.”

“No—no. Haven’t I got *you*? . . .”

“Yes. Me. And the girls. And the boy.” He came third. “And Barnaby——” She paused. The nine years and all of Europe seemed to stand in the way of questioning her daughter. “Isn’t Barnaby coming?” she put it bravely.

“No.”

"Not at all?"

"No."

"Why not, Reesha?"

"Because we're divorced."

Instead of tightening, the mother's arms relaxed.

"What did you do that for?" she demanded shrilly. It was as if her child had broken a vase.

This tone gave Richmiel another mood. She smiled, a wry fascinating smile; sat up and touched her eyes; said: "How you flatter me. However, it *was* I who did it. I divorced him in Paris. The decree came just as I sailed."

"What for, for mercy sakes?"

Richmiel's incomparable brows flickered up. "A number of things. Nothing vulgar or public. We—arranged."

That was all very well for Paris, but: "What are Prospect folks going to say?" Mama cried.

"We needn't tell. Barnaby couldn't get away, that's all."

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Village experience met worldly experience here: "Those things tell themselves. Of course you have the boy——"

"Yes; all the time."

"Doesn't his father have him at all?"

"Not at all, according to the court decree. It was desertion——"

Abruptly Mrs. Crumb's face shot into puckers as cold water may crystallize at a touch. It seemed to be the mention of the court that did it.

"What a disgrace to *me*," she said. "A divorce in *my* family."

"Why, it hasn't anything to do with you." The separation of the offspring was complete.

In the parent stalk no such sense of separation existed. It was *her* disgrace. "My little girl," she wept. And again: "My poor, poor Reesha."

Obscurely nettled, "Not now," Richmiel said. "It was 'poor me' while I was tied."

Curiosity quenched the mother's tears. Why didn't Reesha tell something? Reesha

now did tell. She laid before Mama the nine years, edited. And Mama incredulously demanded: "Was that *all*?"

"Wasn't that enough?"

"Yes, yes. But didn't he *do* anything? Wasn't there some other woman?"

"No. I don't think there ever was. I know it."

"And you went through the divorce courts just because——"

"Just because we hated each other."

"I never heard of such a thing," cried Mama. "How in the world did you get a court to give you a divorce on that?"

"It was done quietly. Barnaby did it. He went over to England for a year—that was the desertion. I was at Vevay and Cannes. Part of that time he had Oliver—it gave me a splendid rest. Of course the court didn't know anything about that. Then we had the hearing. That was all there was to it."

Mama was weeping again: "When you

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were a little thing, if I had ever imagined——”

Now it was Richmiel who brooded upon her, murmured to her. Richmiel formed her words as if her lips were closing over them. Her murmured words were made like kisses.

Tweet and Pearl came upon them, Tweet saying: “You two have had long enough. What are you talking about, anyway?” At sight of Mama’s tears they stood smitten with curiosity that was clothed in solicitude.

Now the explanation. Soft cries, commiseration, lament, a hornet’s nest. And at last Richmiel yawning and going off to bed.

Hearing their high voices, Leda divined that they must know it now, whatever it was. When there came a tap at the door and the inevitable “It’s only me, Cousin Leda,” she was for once glad to admit Pearl. Pearl enjoyably told her all and demanded with bright eyes: “Isn’t it awful for Reesha?”

Leda said: “Then he’ll never come here now?”

“I should hope not. Reesha says——”

When Pearl went away, Leda stood very small in her room. She had been a minute living thing circumscribed by death. In that interval she had become a minute dead thing circumscribed by roaring confusion. In her now was no sensation; but a silence. Now she understood that she had never once faced her months in this house. She had merely fled for refuge to the thought of the arrival of this other being; but yet not to the being; to the abstraction.

Instead there awaited her that new horror, new by only a few thousand years, which attends on the emergence of sensibility: The new horror of an isolated sensibility warred upon by the still insensible flesh of the race from which it rises.

That day she sought out the young Prospect physician, told him it was imperative that she return to work; was accused of her sleepless nights and of the devouring pain; was warned that she had one chance to avoid long illness, and that chance was rest. She

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disbelieved, raged, brought no alternative; angrily told him that it was laughable to be a mind and a spirit caught in a web of no money. The young physician reminded her that it had happened before. "Get interested in your surroundings," said he.

IV

RICHMIEL sat in negligée, pink and perishable, in fact partly perished; Tweet in a negligée creased with regularity as a negligée kept in a trunk. Mama's negligée was durable and over it she wore a white apron. They were, in this second week after the arrival of Richmiel, planning a party for her. The making of the list involved the recital to Richmiel of nine years of occurrence. Dishonor, gain, love, betrayal, courage surged from Mama and Tweet and Pearl. Nine years of blood and tears and joy. Often in the same tone they included a pattern or a recipe.

"All very bad," said Richmiel yawning, "but my disaster was the worst. I married a Brain. I fancy," she shot at Leda, "you wouldn't mind that?"

Leda sat there. deep in her rôle of spec-

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tator, reduced, scaled down, less than herself.

"Any brain?" she murmured. "Marry any brain?"

"I would marry no brain," Richmiel declared. "I would marry nothing, nothing but a heart. The difficulty is, a heart burns out, but there is a man's nice hard brain saved from the fire. Nothing else. And it's all you've left, forevermore."

Hearing her say this with a manner of having rehearsed and even already delivered it, Leda was touched. This was better than that evening spent in telling them of the canals of Venice. And the doves, the doves.

"But this husband of mine whom I've just divorced," she went on, "had not only brains but souls. Oh, several. It was terrible."

Leda was looking at Richmiel's hand—a hand manifesting marriage, no one could say how. Leda was thinking that he knew every vein of that hand; had loved it, hated it.

"Was he——?" Leda stopped. Already

she had tried to ask about him. "Was he——?" she said again, and could ask nothing. She regarded Richmiel's disorderly pink length, saw, as she had already seen in her, the domestic wanton, without occupation; was silent.

Mama, her own life going on briskly within her, had counted something with moving lips and now said: "I've got enough napkins—six dozen, of nice linen." She glowed with housewifery. In her face was the time when she had had no linen napkins. "*With* the initial," she added, and glanced about. "Papa bought them," she superadded; and then the thought of Mr. Crumb lay spread upon her face like fine ashes. All the life that she had stirred in her. But it was not enough life to signal to her daughters, who hardly heard what she said; or heard no more than she said.

The telephone rang, and Tweet sprang to answer it. Though in Prospect the telephone was always answered on the run, Tweet's haste seemed more than custom.

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She came back sparkling. Mama cried: "Who was that? Tweet! It's another orphan you've got track of!" Tweet's pink and milky face froze. "And what if it is? I guess Orrin and I——" She remembered Richmiel's presence and dwindled. Her face remained frozen milk, but her new and secret hope warmed her eyes. This look of hope was as if an empty organ within her had uttered words through the walls of her.

Richmiel yawned and let fall a slipper, white satin, not quite clean.

"You ought to have married a man like Barnaby," she directed at Leda.

Leda sat there, walled as she was. "I know it," she said savagely.

"I don't see——" Richmiel appraised her indelicately, hesitated delicately.

"I'm waiting," said Leda coolly, "for another Barnaby."

"*Ciel!*" said Richmiel. "There's only one of him." She lowered her voice, glanced at Pearl, who stood watching the street, and added to Leda: "Pearl asked me what '*ciel*'

means, and I told her it means 'hell.' Now I can have all the effect of swearing and still remain innocent. A great thing, to remain innocent."

Mama said: "If you knew what it is to have Richmiel here again——" as if nobody else did quite know. And when the two smiled at each other it was as if Mama put out sudden spiritual wings and brooded on Richmiel.

Through glass doors might be seen Grandfather Crumb and Oliver, wrapped and moving about the porch. Already they were allies. Oliver's treble piped:

"It's why I want to go away—because he isn't here. Do you think he'll come soon?"

"Like enough, like enough."

"I cried me to sleep to see him—if I am a big boy, I cried."

Leda glanced at Richmiel, but she was listening to Tweet, about the list.

"I think if *maman* cried he might come. But she never cries."

"T—t—t. Never cries."

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"I love him the most," said Oliver. In this was all the tragedy of which his thread of being was capable.

Grandfather Crumb put his head into the room, said: "I'm going to take the little chap for a walk," spoke importantly, with drawn brows, and seemed in haste. He fumbled in his pockets. He was making a place for himself among them, all the life left in him was trying to have it understood that he could function, plan, carry out like anybody.

"You're going to do nothing of the sort," said Mama shrilly. "It's too cold."

Grandfather Crumb's look revealed him without defences, without authority, old. It was only once in a while that he remembered to rebel.

"It was meant right," he mumbled, and withdrew.

Pearl, watching the street, jerked, rose and went into the passage. They heard the loud laugh of the glossy-eyed postman, Duke Envers. Then a silence. After a time Pearl

came back into the room, paused before the mirror in the clock, drooped to a becoming pose and, unobserved, stood rehearsing what had happened. "Tell you what, I'll have to write you one," he had said, lower jaw dropping widely on magnificent teeth, had waved a stubby hand, banged the hall door on her helpless Oh well . . . She knew a very ghost of a thrill, her utmost.

Now they asked Leda about her "mourning," were indulgent to her negative, curved their tones to consideration: "You ought to, or else they'll wonder." Mama said that her "mourning" was the greatest comfort she had. Leda longed to laugh, then suddenly felt as if she were Mama and had mourned. When they offered to help her to wear mourning, Leda felt *gauche*, offensive, moral, as she said: "It isn't that. I don't believe in it." Over her rolled the waves of the Crumb conviction, on which, however, Richmiel rode a gay boat: "It's very *chic*—mourning. Becomes everyone." But now

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Tweet's voice was a stiff line among her many curves and stabbed Leda with:

"My goodness. I never thought you were *that* queer."

There fell on Leda that hush which succeeds any violence. An airy tentative relationship seemed to suffer the rigor of some death. The moment became wholly physical. Leda thought: "Now they have spoken to me as they speak to one another." It seemed as if the order of things must crack open. The order of things was merely to continue with that list.

It had occurred to Leda that if a camera were to be turned upon them all as they sat at table sometimes, clashing under the red eye of the poinsettia, the negative would not register her as there at all. Now, some light defense being thus torn away by Tweet's words, Leda had no longer that covert. She felt naked among them. She heard them in their talk, the inessential amplified, high lights laid upon the casual, inmost principle obscured. She thought:

"If I live here until I get well I shall be mortally ill."

Sitting so quietly, smiling at this Irishism, she seemed an idle poised creature.

Then came Orrin. Huge, rough-coated, thrusting away a handkerchief, his casual cough the cough of a Titan, he was all male. He heard of the party, cried: "Am I invited, mouse?"

"No, Orrin. It's afternoon."

"Supper for me on the flour-barrel!"

"Orrin," said Mama, "we haven't any flour-barrel."

He laughed, eyes closed; said they would have to get a flour-barrel. But Mama said no, because sacks were so nice for wiping-towels. He espied Leda, cried "Well, well, well, *well*, Cousin Leda!" and gave her arm a tug. She stared up at him, smiling her ready pitiful smile. "What *you* doing, Reesha?" he shouted.

"Becoming acclimated, *cher frère*."

He laughed widely to show that he knew his French. Then his face changed. "Jinks,

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I very near forgot." He touched his pockets, produced a telegram. "Gave it to me as I passed the office." His manner was innocently designed to show that a telegram was nothing, nothing at all.

But it was. Something of the initial thrill of Morse himself entered that room; of Marconi: it was a wireless message. And in Richmiel, as she read, there came a thrill more fundamental than the derived emotion of electricity; perhaps akin to it.

Richmiel read her message, cried out as in distaste; and yet her dimples were to be seen. On her sat an immense surprise, an immense gratification. She laid the paper in Mama's hands, but Mama could not find her glasses, quavered "Who's dead?" and passed the paper to the nearest. To Leda.

"From Barnaby, Mama!"

Richmiel's tone seemed to lift the name and scornfully salute it. Scorn in her smile, victory in her eyes, while Leda read aloud with Tweet and Pearl crowded upon her.

"Must communicate with you. Urgent.
Arriving New York Thursday.

"Barnaby."

"Thursday! The day of the party!" was
Mama's comment.

Through their speculation Leda sat silent. Mama was saying that she guessed he'd found out what he'd lost. With a slant look at Richmiel, Tweet said no, it was probably business. Richmiel said nothing, but her eyes made it plain that she too entertained Mama's speculation, and was avid to handle it as became her pride. In the joy that was surging through her Leda was aware of an abrupt dread: What if the man was no god-like abstraction but a creature still caught in the mesh of Richmiel and prowling back to Prospect after her?

The Crumbs were saying that anyway, if he should come even for a day, then no one in town could suspect divorce. That was one comfort.

They went away to make ready for lunch,

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and the room was left empty. This room had been brought forth at a low stage of the vitality of the designers: Little blue livers, little blue kidneys, little blue lungs ran on wall and floor.

On the Thursday of the party, Richmiel came down early to the living-room, where the winter afternoon pallor was splotted with decorations. Richmiel was wearing an evening gown of blue and about her shoulders, deferring to the hour of four, a scarf. If Prospect parties would begin at four and last until eight o'clock of a winter night, one must dress as best one could. Mama, well jetted over, was already down, and Tweet entered, in virgin white, matron snug.

"*Mon dieu,*" said Richmiel, "chairs around the edges. Is it a burial?" She used the word provincial. Tweet said something of this Europe business. Pearl in red, valance and tester effect, entered and exclaimed at them in a superior tone; but instantly she too became engaged.

In the dining-room Leda filled nut dishes and thought: "If they come out here now, they will be at me like that," and despised herself for having no certainty that she could handle them.

The guests were forty women who laughed and acquiesced. Tweet handed slips of paper. The women were expectant: What new game had Mrs. Powers brought from Europe? ("I hope there won't be anything in it I can't spell.") In this game of Tweet's devising, the women were caught in an authentic moment of creation. But the palate and economy were all, life was not concerned. And some were torn between their ancient pride in housewifery and their new pride in not knowing anything whatever about it. Menus were read aloud, prizes awarded—an apron, a plant. The women opened bright flowered bags of needlework. In these occupations lay all that they knew of design. On their talk of the physical were put forth occasional flowers of utter faith-

fulness. Also, it might be, sprigs of curiosity. As:

“You’re expecting Mr. Powers soon, aren’t you?”

Among these women, so modified by domesticity and religion, Richmiel moved: A centauress; a Prospect head-piece, burnished but unchanged, to which had been added a body now measurably cosmopolitan and fleet French hoofs. The centauress replied:

“Ah, Mr. Powers. Possibly. But he is so busy. So besieged. So denied.”

With not a half dozen unwonted adjectives she subdued her Prospect. The women all murmured: Certainly.

As the guests were leaving, the telephone rang for Richmiel. She had thrown off her scarf, her blue and gold exhaled thick fragrance. And now she glowed like a bride. From the telephone she turned and no less than sang to those who remained:

“Mr. Powers has telegraphed me! He will be here with me to-morrow!”

The excitement of entertaining guests tore away more Crumb veils, induced new oblivions. When they had gone, Tweet turned upon Leda: Where, my heavens, had been the chocolate sauce for the ice-cream? What had the company thought, being served with plain vanilla? And the candles on the mantel. Couldn't Leda have remembered to light those? If she was so artistic?

Leda thought: "Either I shall turn to stone in time or I shall shout at them. Shout out and say . . ." She began to think what she should say. Her body ached with the ache of her shoulder, and in her head was a familiar numbness.

"I should think New York might have taught you that much," Tweet pursued it.

With excessive modulations of gentleness Leda heard herself saying: "I'm most awfully sorry for such breaks, Tweet"—and was stupefied by the knowledge that she spoke gently in order to wound Tweet. In order to wound her well. In order to wound her more effectually than by a retaliation in

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kind. And now she longed to escape from herself more than from the Crumbs.

As into waiting arms she sank to that word To-morrow. And she had come to this: Even if it was true that Richmiel's beauty was drawing him back, at least he would be here, real, in this labyrinth of the unreal.

PART II
BARNABY

V

AT breakfast Richmiel said to Oliver:
“Your father’s coming to-day, remember.”

With a manner of indifference he replied:
“I know that.”

“Are you glad?”

He said nothing, twisted about, looked gravely on them all.

“I don’t believe he cares,” Richmiel said aside.

Oliver shouted: “I do!” and burst into tears.

“Well, I don’t believe he wants to see him,” said Richmiel with satisfaction.

But Oliver went about collecting objects in a little box. With these he stood by a street window. His forehead pressed against the glass, he watched all day.

The house breathed its suspense. Noth-

ing was known, everything was surmised. The three women were gentler with Richmiel, who bore in their eyes a new importance. She herself put on elaborate unconcern, hummed. The Gideonite had that morning been obliged to leave his home. His women missed the warm sustentation of his reduction of all to one bright: My stars.

Leda went through the day, still, poised in space, mind registering but withdrawn from routine as if to make room for a deeper functioning. She was webbed in some thick new protection of her own.

Tweet accused her: "You're the funniest. You go around just dreaming."

It was true that from the Crumb household Leda had escaped by the simple expedient of living in the arrival of this man.

Toward the end of the afternoon she went to walk. From his post at the window Oliver declined to accompany her, informed her with patience: "My father is coming." She left the village and walked on the country road. The ground was iron beneath dirty

snow. The sky was expressionless save for a light west smoked with dusk. In the dull air she discerned a quality like brilliance. She was seeing objects as if they were both far off and very near; as she had seen them in the shadow of the death of her father. Clear and close, yet remote from routine, stood the water tower, the pumping station, the island, the power tower, the hop house. All in brilliance so that she saw them as themselves and not as adjuncts to the village. Out of the Crumb house she came abruptly to herself, understood that all was as before, found that she was neither a shadow nor a point of irritation and pain.

She thought: "If Barnaby Powers too is nothing." But here her mind would not dwell. She would think instead: "To-morrow at this time, he will be here. To-night. Perhaps now."

It occurred to her that he might remain for only an hour, might even then be at the house. She turned in the road and ran in the dusk and stumbled in the ruts. She

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thought: "I had a thousand interests. The Crumb house has cut them all off. Is it making me primitive in this too?"

By a mischance familiar to Prospect the electric light was quenched; the streets were black and sparsely starred with gas-lit panes. At the Crumbs' one window thinned the dark air. By that faint challenge she looked for Oliver's face still at the glass. No face was there.

She entered the house. The passage was silent. But the dining-room door opened and Tweet advanced.

"It's ridiculous," said Tweet instantly and softly, "the way you go off to walk alone. People'll think you go to meet somebody."

For the first time a smother of anger caught Leda, whirled her. Her hand was on the living-room door. As she opened it she sang loudly a light bar and sickened with the swift knowledge that she was using song as a weapon. It flashed through her that she had come to all the unpardonable sins of retort; these her flesh performed for

Barnaby

her, blindly. She had a sense of some wound, below the breath, dealt to herself by that light bar.

Before she discerned the room's interior, she was aware that something unwonted was there. It was a more definite value than odor. Particles, perhaps, flowing differently from a new vortex; a different wave-length of personality.

Two candles burned on a high end shelf and threw the room violently from balance. She saw that the three women were there sitting about on the stuffed chairs and the "davenport." And slim and beautiful in a pool of light Oliver stood near someone else.

With an air of incredible formality Tweet spoke: "Cousin Leda. Here's Barnaby."

The whole room flowed toward her. Upon it, in that odd light, the shadow of the man was cast wavering as he rose. He seemed a giant, seemed to fill the air. Above the head of Oliver he put out his hand.

She heard herself saying: "I remember." Manifestly he did not remember. But he

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showed an instant ingathering of attention, as if any presentation were a momentary fusing of personalities.

Tweet tinkled: "All in the dark. Isn't it *like* a country town?"

"It's somehow very right," said Barnaby. "We ought occasionally to move in different lights."

To that word of the abstract, in a house violently dedicated to the concrete, Leda found herself replying in a welling of inner laughter:

"Different colored lights," she said, "thrown on different occasions; then we'd see them." In her own ears her voice sounded louder than it had ever sounded in that house.

The women all stared up at her; she was aware of those four lifted creamy faces.

"Imagine," Barnaby returned gravely, "a quarrelsome person suddenly drenched in green light. Wouldn't he stop it, just?"

He might have read through that gay lilt at her entrance, might have heard Tweet in

the hall. It did not matter. All that mattered were his words, without emphasis, without isolation, flowing in a single impulse, almost parenthetical, faintly husky. Upon them Tweet let loose the dogs of her own breed:

“Oh, but how in the world could that be done?”

“It would be simple,” Barnaby said gravely. “The air of a room changes in other ways as different ones speak. Or even enter.” His faintly smiling look swept Leda, his slur or compliment to her completely safe.

“Unquestionably,” said Richmiel, but as if she merely wished to participate and would have assented to anything. She was on the “davenport,” and buttressed by red satin pillows. Her yellow gown unclothed her. She sat, Leda saw, one foot outstretched, gilt slippered, an eloquent wifely wanton foot; her hands, those veined terribly experienced hands, lay in her lap, waiting; her eyes, double-lidded, heavy as for sleep, were im-

movably fixed upon the man; some powerful principle of assertion, of perpetual physical affirmation—this, Leda thought, was all of Richmiel now.

Barnaby was not looking at her. He was looking at Oliver. The boy's face was lifted to his father as that of a devotee to the heavens. The child was unconscious of anyone else in the room, on the earth. By his look he was drawn into his father, was aware of his father more than of himself.

"Hello, little beastie," Barnaby was saying.

"Hello, daddy!" Oliver cried till the room rang with it.

"Hush—mercy!" said Mama. "What will papa think?" Barnaby knew it was not that Mama cared what papa thought. It was a formula.

"Papa thinks this," said Barnaby.

He held the boy by the arms and looked at him. It was to be seen that he was as greatly aware of the child as the child was aware of him. They looked in each other's eyes. The

Crumbs watched. Leda turned away. She saw that all the power of his look when last she had observed him in that room had passed from Richmiel to the boy. She saw more; felt the father and son to be bathed in the light of their fused presences, light perhaps dimly discernible.

The maid Nettie now thrust open the door. She did so with the gesture of a swimmer, as if she had been beating along the passage and had reached the ropes. "It's on," said she.

As Leda went down the passage, which smelled faintly of beeswax and was lighted by a single candle, she had a sudden laughing sense of that hour. There they all were, going into the dining-room. Momentary well-being assailed her. She looked about, at the women, at the grotesque shadows; she heard the tread of Barnaby Powers and the patter of Oliver. She thought: "No, it's all in me. After all, I'm living." Through the open dining-room door she saw the red eye of the poinsettia.

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It was amazing, the altered aspect of the Crumb dining-room. This was not due alone to the light, to the candles, their glow discreetly assimilative. Nor was it due to the best dishes. It was as if, by the arrival of Barnaby Powers, not only was everyone in that family either diminished or enhanced but the rooms themselves were re-valued.

Barnaby sat at the end of the table where nine years before he had sat at his wedding-supper. But now Richmiel was farther down the board; as if, having no precedent, they had decided upon this as propriety. Oliver, eating nothing, sat beside his father and on being addressed by him blushed like one in love. And there was Grandfather Crumb, to whom on his entrance Barnaby had gone with a manner of meeting a being also infinite, asked how he was, and waited as if he cared, so that Grandfather became more definite, more present; and took his place with an air. To Leda it was as if light touched him. She wondered if the others saw, but no one looked at him strangely.

Behind Barnaby and Oliver was the blue night, and on the pane the snowflakes clung and multiplied like visible and beautiful infusoria.

Barnaby was telling of the snowstorm in which he had arrived in New York.

"Never such beauty in the harbor. Searchlights sending color through that glitter—black water feeling for the color. Worth crossing to see."

"It must have been *very* trying, though," said Pearl.

He smiled at her kindly. Pearl now did not exist, and miraculously she knew it. She was the mindless and bodiless female in the presence of the sophisticated male. Mama felt the failure of her offspring and tried to modify it. Pearl, she said, did not take to the water. The formality of Mama was excessive. Her manner would have ruined any occasion. She seemed literally to set in all her cells. Pickles and jelly alike she handed to Barnaby with an air of, You have robbed my child. But she could not make herself

felt. She became fixed upon a flat stiff background of her own creation and stuck there unattended.

“Reesha,” Barnaby said, “you promised to write me how Oliver stood the voyage—I left before your letter had arrived. Did he find it jolly?”

Richmiel gave him her slow attention, came back with languid difficulty. Into her slight smile she injected a look of suffering. “Oliver was quite jolly on the voyage, thank you. We are both good sailors, you know.”

He considered something; perhaps the differing shades in their uses of “jolly.”

“Did you like it on the boat, son?” he asked. He dropped his voice, addressed him sweetly. The child met his look with adoration, nodded speechlessly and, seeing them all looking, laid his cheek upon his father’s sleeve. Leda was shaken by an abrupt sense that they were one creature, as if each had extensions of being which had fused in something finer than light and color, had become one consciousness.

Upon this consciousness impinged the voice of Richmiel: "He's a lamb," said she. She smiled at the distance, sighed. In this hour Leda saw her not decently diminished, like Mama and Tweet and Pearl. Her spirit, a candle flame in the room, was invisible; but her flesh put on its old enchantments and danced before its former mate. Her body was unconscious of divorce.

And Richmiel and Mama and Tweet and Pearl were covertly watching; were withdrawn, all of them, to dark corners and were waiting for that which Barnaby had come to say.

He seemed in no haste to enter upon that errand of his. He was still intent upon Oliver, who was whispering: "The frost made a park on the window with big palms around. It made palms." His voice rose. "The frost made animals. I saw them."

Richmiel said: "Hush, darling. We don't care, you know."

"What kind of animals?" Barnaby imperturbably asked.

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The little boy replied in his careful way, and by his father's deep attention the child seemed to emerge to a spiritual adulthood. Perhaps the adulthood of that fused consciousness of those two.

Tweet now obviously made an effort. As a hostess, Leda noted, Tweet's efforts were as evident as her nose.

"I think," she said, tilting her head in her delicacy, "when we have *two* clever people at the table, we *might* be entertained. Cousin Leda, you and Barnaby are both writers; you ought to talk and let us listen."

Barnaby looked at Leda, that intent look with which he did homage to others. And Leda was in some soft brilliance. She was augmented, as if room had been made in her flesh for other life and it had entered. But she spoke with impeccable gravity:

"We might," she said, her eyes meeting Barnaby's, "give our favorite quotations."

He nodded, no less grave. It occurred to him that there are women who smile less by displacing muscles than by emitting light.

With no smile between them, the moment took its toll of humor; they shared it and it went its way. And Tweet with ardor said: "Oh, do!" And when Leda added that this was a favorite Prospect recreation, that you went to a party all prepared with a quotation lest a hostess ask you unaware; and said to Barnaby: "I hope you are prepared?" it was Tweet who cried: "Well, I should hope Barnaby knows quotations enough without preparing!" At some millennium dividing them from Tweet, Leda and the man looked gravely and together. To any disloyalty in this occupation they were less sensitive than to shadows.

"Oh, please," said Richmiel, "let's not get literary." And looked at no one.

At this Grandfather Crumb burst into laughter, smote the table lightly and said rapidly: "Jingoes, jingoes, jingoes." At Mama's "Mercy, what is it, Grandfather?" he subsided to an embarrassed chuckle, and Tweet audibly explained to Barnaby: "We do sometimes think he's a little——"

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“Grandfather,” said Mama kindly, “now eat up your sauce. Eat it up.”

The terrible hour passed to its own limbo.

“Do you mind,” said Barnaby when at last Mama would have risen, “do you mind stopping here? Can we talk here for a little?”

They caught the import of his tone. Whatever it was that he had come to talk about, it would be talked about now. When Leda would have risen, they restrained her: “Cousin Leda, you are one of us, remember.”

She protested, and Barnaby looked up at her quizzically; said: “We may need your humor.”

She thought: “I can’t leave him to meet them alone,” and sat down.

They called to Nettie to draw the cloth. They bade Grandfather Crumb take Oliver away. At the *empressement* of their preparations Barnaby sat gravely attentive.

“There was,” he said, “really no need to clear the decks—save of the boy. It is of him that I wish to speak.”

Barnaby

Of him. . . .

Oliver heard and came flying back. Already he had kissed his father good-night, clinging to him and whispering. Now he cried out as if in iteration:

"You will—you will be here when I wake up?"

Barnaby did not touch him, but he bent upon his son a look which seemed to take account of him, body and soul, and all the farther reaches of his being. "At least I won't go away until I see you once more," he promised.

Oliver burst out passionately: "More than that! More than that!"

Richmiel rose and hurried to him, stooped to him, laid hands upon him, the overwhelmingly maternal. "Darling," she breathed, "it's all right. It's all right."

This lie he indignantly repudiated. "I want to know."

Barnaby said: "We'll talk about that next time. Go now, son."

At the word Richmiel lifted her chin, dropped her lids.

VI

IN the dining-room as the door closed there breathed yet another air; as if colored light were not necessary to define a moment, but influence alone. Oblique light was on Barnaby. His head rested on his hand, a hand brown, lustreless, dry, obscurely and beautifully veined. He spoke evenly:

“I find,” he said, “that I miss the boy intolerably.”

Richmiel bent her body back in her chair and warmed her hand at the radiator. In that dim light her yellow gown and yellow hair and the click of her rings on the metal were all of her that was evident as she answered languidly: “I should hardly have thought that you would.”

“It was,” he said, “a surprise to me, I confess. I had always taken him for granted. He was—don’t you see, he was *there*. I had him with me, in London and in Switzerland. Now he’s—not there,”

"I understand perfectly," she told him suavely. "I couldn't live without him either, me."

He regarded her steadily, saying: "I hoped that you might have become accustomed to it, in those months at Cannes."

"Ah, they only proved to me how necessary he is."

Silence fell. Richmiel warmed her hands, touching at the radiator. Her rings clicked rhythmically on the metal.

"I think," Barnaby said, "I think it was those months which taught me—Oliver. It cost me a good deal to part from him; I thought then that it was the only way. But when I found myself missing him so much, I wondered if it *is* the only way."

The rings stopped clicking on the radiator. Richmiel lifted her eyes without lifting her head, an unpleasant attitude.

"So I came here to find out," he concluded. The faint huskiness of his voice thrilled them all, though not all knew this to be

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Richmiel cried incredulously: "You crossed on purpose?"

"Yes."

"No publisher to see or anything?"

He did not flush nor move. But when he spoke his tone had dropped: "No."

"Well!" said Richmiel. "You must have changed."

"I want," he said merely, "to see what we can do."

"I don't see that we can do anything." Again the leisurely clicking of the rings. "The courts gave him to me."

"What have we to do with courts?" His voice quickened.

"The courts gave me my decree."

"Surely our dealing is with factors which courts do not take much into account."

"Really! Are you an anarchist now?"

He was silent for so long that Leda thought it was all but unpardonable of him.

"Certain things in human relations," he said at length, "must be settled by appealing to the whole background, the whole nature

of those involved. Do you—understand me?”

“Well, but not this.”

“This sort of thing above all. When—when a child is involved. And his future.”

“Why didn’t you think of that before?”

“I confess that I did. But other aspects were absorbing me at the time. Selfish considerations——”

“You don’t call this a selfish consideration?”

“Perhaps so. Unavoidably.”

“Oh, not,” she said, “unavoidably.”

“I suppose, when I think of it so, it is selfish. There were nights at Geneva when for the first time in years I knew what it was to be lonely.”

The clicking ceased again.

“Off my room at the Inn there was a balcony. Oliver used to be out there a good deal. I noticed that I couldn’t sit on that balcony—after. It surprised me. I had no idea that he had—done that. I found the Inn unbearable. I found London unbear-

able." His voice rose. "I found that I could not get on without the boy, Reesha."

"And so what do you think of doing?" Nine years of marriage, eight of distaste; yet clearly she was avid for him to tell her that he wanted to take it up again—even for the sake of the boy. Avid to refuse to return to him; already tasting her refusal as she waited for his words.

His words were: "Let me have him."

The rings smote the radiator sharply.

"That is impossible."

"I mean—you see our arrangement should be unchanged. I mean, the practical part."

"I'm not thinking of the money."

He waited for her to say what she was thinking of, then.

"Do you imagine that I don't love my child?"

He had folded his arms and now leaned on the table, staring at her. "I understand all about that," he said with deliberation. "Even so, he might be excessively in your way."

Here he received an ally. Mrs. Crumb, tautly listening, head thrown well back, mouth drooping, cried: "Reesha, why don't you let his father have him, if you go to California, instead of leaving him here with us? Pounding around."

Perceiving nothing of the enormous effect of this, Mama pressed her point.

"My part, I can't stand a big boy smashing around my house, with his mother gone. I'm too old. Best leave him with your—with his father that long, Reesha."

He took no advantage. He merely waited.

Richmiel was not good at explaining, spoke with hesitations, lost her detachment. "Well, of course that was only—I was just thinking in case—I really didn't know what else——"

"Quite so," said Barnaby. "May I not then actually be of some service?"

"But you mean to keep him!" she cried harshly. "And you needn't think——"

"I think nothing. I only hope for all that you will give up to me."

At once she was mollified. Since he meant to take no advantage of Mama's incautious revelation, since he was actually willing to sue for some of Oliver—— "I thought," she said, "of going for three months to California. I wanted to leave him here."

"It's too much," said Mama decisively. "Great big boy, so."

"Of course," Tweet pensively emerged with, "I have wanted to adopt a child. Deeply. A little girl. Little girls are so much more—— Still, *I* should love to have Oliver here. Simply love it. I could take the whole care of him, Mama."

"I know you," said Mama, briefly and brutally.

"Well, Cousin Leda and I together could," Tweet amended. "Couldn't we, Cousin Leda?"

Leda had retreated to that blue-black window, stood there, her back to the room, staring into the dark, with a manner of clinging to the pane like the infusoria. The hour gave her intolerable discomfort. It was as

if the presence of Barnaby, augmenting her, had augmented also her power to suffer. Now she turned and met his eyes. He said gravely:

“Oliver told me first thing about you.”

He seemed curiously insensible to the slight of this to the family.

By this released from her silence, Leda said to him: “Oliver is wonderful. Sensitive beyond words.” She was all but saying that now everything would depend on Oliver’s upbringing, and this the father caught and assented to: “I know.” Momentarily their eyes met, then went to Richmiel.

Over California Richmiel’s mind, bright butterfly, was hovering.

“The winter here is very hard on me,” she plaintively said. “I thought if I could get out somewhere in the sun for three months——” She warmed her hands again.

“An excellent idea,” Barnaby agreed.

“And hotels are *not* the place for children.”

He was too wise to press her. She was

squirrel-like: Wait for her and she might hop to your hand.

"You would take him to Switzerland?"

"I have lecture engagements which would make that imperative."

"And when I was ready you would bring him back here?"

"If you insist, certainly. But I hoped—— Would it be possible, Reesha, for me to have him a part of every year? Who knows—— you might wish to go to California every winter. . . ."

This she considered, came finally to: "Of course I must not think only of myself. If by my sacrifice Oliver had a bit of Europe now and then——"

"Precisely," said Barnaby. He was not scrupulous about her processes if only she arrived. He was not even amused when she deferred to Mrs. Crumb: "Mama, *you* think I would be right?"

"Mercy, yes," said Mama. "Let him go."

"Tweet——?" Her look dared Tweet to dissent.

"How would it be to let Oliver decide?" Tweet asked wickedly.

Richmiel swept it aside: "Absurd!" They all knew why.

They forgot Pearl, who now said: "It would be lovely to have a little child around the house here," and sighed. She knew an ambiguous bodily satisfaction in admitting her fondness for little children. She glanced at Barnaby.

"Do advise me, Leda," Richmiel begged.

Barnaby turned and looked up at Leda. Standing against the blue-black pane her delicacy was divine. She said only: "Of course anybody would be glad to have Oliver."

On which Richmiel darted at her a sharp and speculative look.

"You must give me," said Richmiel, "you must give me to-night to think of it. You are asking me to decide something frightfully difficult."

When they rose to go to their rooms: "You

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are very good to have taken me in," Barnaby said to Mama.

Mama replied: "Well, we wouldn't want the town telling around that you had stayed down at the hotel."

He continued evenly: "If Richmiel consents, I should be off as soon as it's convenient for Oliver to be ready."

"We could hurry that up for you easy," said Mama politely.

For a time that night Mama lay in her bed and was wakeful. She felt complacent, exultant. Dear little boy—but she was too old.

Her door was pushed open. Richmiel came in, her padded robe smelling of her perfumes. She sat on the edge of the bed. Mama's arms went round her.

"Dearest. . . ."

"What is it? Tell Mama."

"There's another reason why."

"Another reason?"

"Yes. It isn't that I haven't enough, but——"

"I *thought* maybe he didn't give you as much as he should!"

"Yes, yes he did. It isn't that. But perhaps I haven't been as wise as I should have been——"

"You refused it!"

"No, oh no. I didn't refuse it. I took it, of course; it was mine, wasn't it? Oliver's and mine. But then in New York I invested a little bit; I mean, borrowed and invested——"

"Reesha!"

"I'm afraid I was badly advised. I held on too long. I did lose quite a bit."

"But California——"

"Oh, I'm not a beggar. I've enough for California. But I'm thinking ahead. Oliver's education——"

"Of course his father is the one to 'tend to that."

"You really think I'm right, Mama?"

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"I think it's much the best way for you; much the best."

"It is, isn't it? And you'll try to make Tweet see? I thought she——"

"What difference does it make what anybody thinks if you know you've done right?" said Mama.

"Darling little Mama——"

"Dear lamb——"

In this whisper something lovely bound the two. Richmiel went away trailing her fragrances, and in her flesh was freedom.

Mama thought: "Every carpet in the house would have been worn to yarn by spring."

Oliver's tiny room was between Richmiel's and Leda's room. In the night Leda heard him sobbing. She herself had not slept. She had been looking into darkness toward a little well of light in her head where was Barnaby.

She rose and found her way to Oliver's bed. He seized her, clung to her, wept,

whispered: "I thought if my daddy should go 'way."

She held him, murmured to him. His body was shaken by his sobs. His hands were hot. Again and again he said: "I thought if my daddy should go 'way."

When she saw that she could not quiet him she led him to her room, wrapped him and herself warmly, sat beside the window in thin moonlight. But there it was cold, and she thought that his wild sobbing would wake the others. And she thought of their loud and terrible concern. The warm living-room and a picture book presented themselves.

He went with her quietly, his clasp of her hand pathetically tight. The passage gas burned low. The trunk-room door opened. Grandfather Crumb stood at the end of the passage.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Oliver sobbed: "I thought if my daddy should go 'way."

There was somewhere a stir, and Leda held her breath lest there be loosed the naked

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anxiety of the Crumbs, roused from sleep. Hardly of Richmiel, but of Mama, of Tweet, exclamatory, shrill, makers of drama in the night.

However, it was an upper door that opened, and the step was on the upper stair. With a hushed cry Oliver ran forward.

Barnaby came down, grave, questioning. He was dressed and held a half-burned cigar. She loved his air of the casual, of participating in the expectable. He said nothing as his arms closed round the boy. Oliver leaned to him, murmuring: "I thought if you should go 'way and leave me."

Grandfather Crumb came tiptoeing up the passage. About his shoulders he had dragged an old army blanket. His terrible feet were bare. He thrust out a hand and shook it stiffly at Barnaby:

"Don't ye leave him! Don't ye leave him!" he muttered. "Don't *you* say so?" he demanded of Leda.

Barnaby's eyes questioned her. She stood pallid in her straight black gown. scarlet

flowers embroidered on its sleeves. "I think he will die if you leave him again," she said. She told how she had found him.

The four stood under the gas jet in the dim whitish passage. They murmured, not so much in deference to the sleep of the women as lest these should wake to their conversational violences. In the passage the four drew together, all in bondage of some sort to this house; as if the finer must be inescapably in bondage to the coarser.

"I'm afraid he's ill now," Barnaby said anxiously.

Leda asked: "Shall I call someone?"

"No, for Lord's sake," said he. He smiled into her eyes unabashed. "I'll take him up with me," he added; "I've a good fire."

He turned to Grandfather Crumb: "Dear soul, I think I've arranged not to leave him for some time yet."

The old man faced about, as if his responsibility were ended, and moved back down the passage. Methodically Barnaby transferred his attention to Leda, his incompar-

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able attention which appeared to cherish every contact.

"You seem," he said to her gravely, "to be in place everywhere. Good night." With the boy in his arms he began to mount the stairs, tossing back: "You're wonderful to him; I've seen that."

She could say nothing, stood there for a moment, dumb. As she heard his door close she closed her own.

Until dawn was in the room she lay awake. The pain was there, but unattended, like a flame in summer noon. She bathed and dressed in the cold and let herself into the street, a grayish corridor of new snow and early shadow. White boughs were woven within an unearthly dusk. But all was pulsing softly as in some spring. She felt a new technique of being.

She recalled the nascent sweetness of her former hours alone; it was as if that star had now swung near enough to declare itself a sun. She was permeated by Barnaby, interpenetrating, fusing. By the measure

of her finenesses she exceeded the experience of her kind; by her simplicities she was the more primitive. She noted, as of one apart, that her mind was almost in suspension. She had become an area of sensation, of song. Here was new technique of apprehension, too: The sky, the country roads were no longer surfaces; they were enfolding contacts. She ran in the snow and felt both light and inexplicably heavy, glad and tearful. Laughter, tears, running, shouting, these were not enough. There was more to do.

Returning in an hour she entered the Crumb street and saw Barnaby Powers standing hatless at the gate as if he had emerged, substantial, from her thought of him. She began to run again, unevenly in the now trodden snow, forced herself to walk, was keen to hurry away, faced him speechless and at last heard herself asking for Oliver. And at herself she felt stark amazement. After her weeks of numb with-

drawal, to be alive as she was alive now seemed a nakedness.

Oliver was still sleeping, Barnaby replied, and when she spoke of the beauty, yet thinking not at all of the beauty, he glanced about with an air of query and faced the growing glitter with the impersonal scrutiny of one in an unknown place. "Is it? I see the outer beauty. But I've lost—that other. Do you know? I mean my own relation to it. I mean——"

"Oh, that," she murmured. "Yes, I know." Who did not know? That inner correspondence to beauty had been lost to her too in those days at the Crumbs', but always it would return as it had now returned. He must be wretched indeed if that had gone.

The clouds were low gray in many shining margins to the east. From these to the bright dry down of the snow his glance swept. In any case, she thought, he was beautifully casual about being wretched, a gallantry to her feelings which touched her. He spoke almost idly: "For years I've not

felt anything beautiful as clear sensation. I've looked at it only from the outside, as impression. Forgive me—you ask my attention to the universe and I talk about myself."

She said: "All one's universe is one's relation to it," and was shot through with splendor when he asked: "Do you mind my having observed that you appear extraordinarily related up with yours? You're seeing things here and now which I've lost the power to see and feel. I see line and mass, but their positives, their spirits, will have nothing to do with me. . . ."

Now that her own reality had returned upon her, she began to lose his. Her blind excitement in his presence was partly amazement at him. It was incredible that here, at the Crumb gate, someone should be talking to her like this. She looked hard at him. From his face, schooled, tired, marred, there yet peered a fiery quenchless being.

She said: "We're always running away from beauty and being drawn back."

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He lifted his shoulders, drew in a breath of the cold as if it could heal him.

"It's I who must get back," he told her, "and I seem to have lost the trick."

At the foot of the steps they paused in a shaft of light copper fallen from the east. She looked up at him mutely and thought: "He's a god in a net. They've bound him. . . ."

"You have enormous power," he said abruptly; "I saw that last evening. I mean, you make me notice that we're divine beings. I don't know how you do that."

She said something flippant and was afterward wretched because of it. What an uncomfortable person, she said, she must be to have about. But he hardly heard her.

"I don't see how in the thunder," he observed sharply, "you come to be living here."

The house door opened. Mama stood there in the standard negligée and white apron. In her preoccupation she offered no estimate of their appearance. She looked only at Barnaby and said:

“Oliver’s awake. He’s sick, he’s crying for you.”

In the Crumbs’ “spare room,” that chaste domestic nest, Richmiel had diffused a fragrance as of the Horsel. And sober lines were broken up by lacy garments in grotesque disarray. It was an odd place for a little sick boy.

Toward noon Leda entered that room. Mama was there, moving uncertainly about with a cup. Beside the bed was Barnaby, as he had been through the morning. Oliver was pale, but more vivid than Leda had ever seen him. In sheer terror lest his father should leave him, some delicate mechanism had succumbed. But now he was better, was reassured; was to leave, if he was well enough, with Barnaby the following afternoon.

“I’m going away with my father,” he announced to Leda.

Mama fixed him, cup poised: “And are you going to be a good boy?”

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Leda asked hurriedly: "What shall I bring you from down town this afternoon?"

"Something for daddy," said Oliver.

Mama asked: "Where's your manners?" and went out, with her cup.

They were silent. Oliver was clinging to his father's hand. In the big brooding figure, elbow on knee and hand covering mouth, Leda saw without surprise that precise Barnaby whom she had in those days of expectation pictured, only his smouldering eyes were all for Oliver.

"Extraordinary relationship, fatherhood," he said abruptly.

He went on, more to himself than to her—a kindling compliment: "I'd like to have been the primitive man on whom it dawned that an unidentified act was somehow responsible for the child on whom he looked. What bewilderment for them as they tried to understand . . . Discovery of life on the other planets is nothing beside it. Planetary life is expectable; we're fools not to take it for granted. But that!"

"What?" asked Oliver politely, seeing his intent look.

"You!" said Barnaby. Now he looked at Leda. "A child feels so much nearer to his father than the father feels to the child. It's pathetic. A father is a poor detached cuss."

She said: "Not you."

"I was. I was till this appalling loneliness for him set in. But I'm not sure *that* isn't three parts pure selfishness."

"No," said Leda, "you and he have something connecting you; I felt that last night."

"A kind of ghostly membrane—eh, dear boy?"

Oliver contributed that he had new shoes to wear when he went away.

"New everything," said Barnaby. "I feel new when I'm with him. Everything else goes. Nothing else seems important."

"Nothing else is important," said Leda.

He smiled at her abstractedly. "You," he said. "You must be very important to everyone who knows you."

Tweet entered. For some reason she tip-

toed, a process which made her appear unpleasantly tall and irregularly contrived. She whispered, lifting her eyebrows as if for the purpose. She had, she said, brought something for Oliver. "Aunt Tweet has brought you something nice—yes-s-s," with how many sibilants endowing her speech.

He looked at her languidly. He hoped that it was not food again. She unwrapped it, the paper rattling horribly, and disclosed a little painted duck having a squawk. She squawked it, so to say. Oliver wept.

"He's in pain!" Tweet whispered, and ran tiptoeing to take the news that he was worse.

Barnaby gathered the boy in his arms. It was too much to see that devouring still tenderness. Leda rose.

"Don't go," he said gravely.

The door opened again. This time it was Richmiel. She ran in, dramatizing Tweet's news; stooped to the bed; cried: "My darling!" and touched him.

"You tickle!" Oliver shouted.

Her irritation at this, Richmiel expended

on Leda. "I'll relieve you now," Richmiel said rather grandly. "I'll sit with my little boy." And by the formality of her thanks cut off Leda quite. Only in annoyance was a Crumb so scrupulous to the family. Leda closed the door on "Mama's right here, Lover . . . right here. . . ."

The passages were dark. At the Crumbs', lamp-lighting was not a ceremony, lovely in its implication. Merely it was done or it wasn't done. The lunette of glass above the front door showed faintly blue, the ground glass of the panels gray. In that delicate darkness proportion invaded the hall, and it attained to the beauty of the indefinite.

At the bottom of the stairs its Voice seemed to speak: "How's the little feller? How is he now?"

"Better, Grandfather."

"I had summat for him—if he wanted it."

"Go up, Grandfather. Oliver would like that, you know."

"Who's up there?"

"His father and his mother."

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"Don't give 'em the same breath."

The Voice manifested no more. He must have been sitting there in the darkness. She did not say: "Sit in here, Grandfather!" feeling that there was too much of arranging everybody in that house.

She had an errand outside for Oliver, and, returning in half an hour, heard Mama and Tweet and Pearl safely laying the dining-room table; and she entered the living-room, dark save for a faint fire. Invisible now the bars of the wall-paper which made of the room a cage. Blurred boundaries drew away, isolating a polished surface, a line of indeterminate color. The focal fire was as perfect as a temple fire. She tasted the lovely strangeness of early darkness in an ugly house.

As if the air were pricking with speech, another Voice sounded; and someone rose from a hearth chair.

"Come and sit here. Ah, you did go for a walk. I came down to go with you."

"Oh," she said sharply. "I'm sorry I missed that."

"This is better," Barnaby said only.

He sat leaning forward, his hands loosely clasped showing the blood in their veins. He was looking not at the fire or at the floor, but low in the air as if at the feet of strangers. Abruptly the mystery of his breathing assailed her; the deep chest, the broad shoulders, moving like that over the intaking of life. This irresistible and importunate habit seemed suddenly to prove him godlike.

He was saying absently: "Pity fire isn't human—it would so enjoy it!" And it was extraordinary how with a word they slipped into another place and closed the door. For her, as he spoke, the gamut of being shared by them lay lightly revealed, stretching either way, curving upon itself—earth, air, spirit and beyond. But perhaps after all their intimacy was partly due to the pealing voices of Mama and Tweet and Pearl, there in the dining-room and talking about salt shakers.

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Leda thought: His love for Oliver—that must belong to some better way of being. She remembered how that morning he had slipped his arms beneath the little body and stayed, so crouched, long after the child slept. She said something of this.

“Oh, Oliver makes me feel ‘made in the image.’ ” After a silence, positive, like a rest in music, he added: “So do you.”

“I?”

“I told you this morning. You make me extraordinarily aware that we’re all divine beings.”

This time she said nothing. The moment’s silence was as if a third were sharing in the talk. She wondered what he meant. In that house she had never seemed to herself even human until they hurt her; and until he came.

“I’m blessed if I know how you do it,” he went on. “Perhaps it’s because you’re so still. Even when you talk—the majority of you is still.”

At this she laughed, thinking how in his

presence one became multiplied, arrived at more being. But she was afraid to tell him so. Not afraid of him essentially, but rather of his external and worldly self, the guest of that house.

The voices of that house came in from the dining-room:

“ . . . a red dress. About the color of this wall-paper.”

“Red, Mama! Don’t say red. There’s nothing red about this wall-paper. It’s rose.”

“I call it red. Papa used to call it red too.”

“But it’s a *de-cided* rose.”

And Pearl: “Well, go on about the dress. If it’s half as dowdy as the one she’s been wearing——”

Her voice fell in a progress toward the pantry.

The voice of Barnaby repeated evenly: “Extraordinarily aware that we’re all divine beings. It *is* extraordinary, it seems, to be aware of this at all.”

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Now they sat silent. The dining-room voices returned and retreated in a rhythm of their own. The fire failed, deepening the boundaries of shadow. It was an intense affirmation to sit there saying nothing.

Soon he lifted his look, a question in it; but was caught by her aspect and covertly watched her. She was so serene, so shining. He marveled at her, a normal human creature, yet with the poise and brightness and clarity of some other being. She felt his scrutiny, turned, smiled at him as one child smiles at another across a schoolroom. He thought: "Is she without sex? Then has she never reached it or has she transcended it?" He fell to speculating on the case of angels. "Perhaps they know something better."

He went back to his question: "Do you know that it's more quiet in any room when you enter it? Yes, I've noticed. If there are people there, you lower their emphasis. If there is no one there—well, it is the same. Objects must know you. . . ."

"That must mean low vitality. Nothing responds to me."

"The very highest vitality. Something new. You tune folk differently. The only one in the house who is keyed to you is Oliver."

"Ah, Oliver. But he belongs to another kind of creature."

"Well," said Barnaby and nodded, as if he were confirmed.

Another silence, and from it he shot another question: "You think I'm right to take the boy?"

"Oh, so right."

"You don't feel that his illness came because he didn't want to leave his mother?"

"His illness came only because he thought you were going to leave him."

"If I could be sure of that——"

"But Richmiel says that he was so for days after you left him in Paris."

He averted his look of surprise, but not in time. She saw that this fact Richmiel had not imparted to him. He said no more of it.

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Mama and Tweet and Pearl now reached a climax; voices flat, thin; emphasis arbitrary:

“Not like that, Mama. It looks *so*.”

“I set table before you were born.”

“Well, but now I *am* born.”

“Your father always liked the way I set table.”

“But you’re not setting it for him.”

Mama’s voice broke: “I’m thankful he can’t know how you cut me.” Dead for a decade, he was yet her defender. Abruptly Leda felt, in this constant reference of Mama’s, something winged.

Now while the voices went on, Barnaby turned upon Leda that attention which seemed to take so exquisite an account of another.

“This morning I had the bad taste to ask you how you came to be living here.”

As she answered there was about her something terribly adult; as if time had overtaken her: “Everything went—except neuritis.

They have taken me in until I feel well enough to work."

"But we've let you care for Oliver to-day. I'd no idea——"

"Please—I've loved it. . . ."

There was magnificence in his elision as he spoke of her relationship in that household and outrageously disregarded all else: "I wonder if you will be able to transcend it—I mean living here. You have power, but have you that much? Forgive me, don't answer that. What were you doing before?"

"Writing, but not very well."

"That's nothing to do with living. Where were you living?"

She told him. He said roughly: "Can't you get out?"

She said that she was to go presently to Chicago for a week with an old Prospect friend, Alice Lebanon; that she was writing a little now, that she should be better by summer. He cut her short with:

"But you have the Almighty in your eyes. This that you're doing isn't enough. Can't

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you get out?" he asked again. The insistence was crude, deliberate, tender.

She was assailed by the wonder of being here with this man understanding. She forgot to answer and sat silent, bathed in that sheer fact. The dining-room clock struck six, and she felt herself quite clearly there in the house as it would be when he had gone. She said brusquely: "I wish for you and Oliver everything beautiful."

He answered curtly: "Not so fast, please."

She thought that she had offended him by an impossible wish, as one offends who wishes a very old person many birthdays.

"Yes," she said earnestly. "It will come to both of you, to you and to him."

"Please don't put so much farewell in your tone," he begged gravely.

Somewhere a door was opened and a shrill voice of terror sounded: "He's gone—my papa's gone!"

Barnaby rose, paused: "You've given me

a little while of rest, the first I've known. . . ."

Her look met his mutely. He put down his hand, found hers, went.

Leda sat in that room which had witnessed the many ministries of the Crumbs upon her, playful rites, irritations. From the room some medium now separated her. Now also those marauding voices came blurred as in a mere comfortable stir of preparation. In the room above she heard the tread of Barnaby. She caught the secret music of the house, had a starrier view of it. And in her there arose a sense of clear being. She felt able, she felt new. She had a fleeting impression of her essential self, the slow-breathing inner Her. . . .

She knew why. For all this was to be resolved into his words: "Please don't put so much farewell in your tone."

In the morning the Crumbs went off to church, save Richmiel, who had sent for the Prospect hair-dresser; and Grandfather

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Crumb, who, as Leda sat with Oliver at his late breakfast, entered and laid on the table a bright quarter. "A little summat," he said apologetically; and sat near the boy, head bent in attention, eyes given over to life. When Barnaby came into the room Grandfather Crumb cried "How are you?" in a voice full and somehow modernized.

These four were happy together.

When the dining-room clock struck twelve Grandfather Crumb rose stiffly, balanced, and went to the cellar, "to split up a squash," he explained with his faint importance. The three sat silent, withdrawn to the sunny bow-window. But Leda had begun to be conscious of dull blows: The recurrent thought that at three o'clock that afternoon all this would end. Switzerland. . . .

Barnaby sat with his beautiful lustreless hand supporting his head; and his eyes, tranquil, impersonal, rested upon her. She knew that they were upon her, and she was glad. She heard him speaking:

Barnaby

"You said something of Chicago."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Not for some days."

"If I stayed on in Chicago to pay a visit or two, would you let me know when you come there?"

It was spoken casually and as to a friend of years. It was so that she heard herself answering.

VII

AS if in imitation of the mind of Prospect on Sunday, the weather was idle, relaxed, indulgent. But the air held Spring, an inner perfume.

They all went to the station. On that barren platform of wet red bricks, loud with junction traffic, certain rôles were presented. As:

"Is the Blessed going away?" Mama demanded, and played compunction, even felt emotion, too, that doubtful triumph of the not consummate actor. Above Oliver Mama stooped in the tight wolf cape that papa had bought for her a generation ago, a curving hat over her lively wave, the youth in her incarnating a little more now that she was having her own way.

With his beautiful earnestness Oliver replied: "Oh, yes. *Didn't* you know?"

"I wish he wasn't going," said Tweet. Tweet's eyes were reddened, and in her face when she looked at Oliver there was beauty. She was in earnest and she wasn't, for it was really a little girl with sashes that she wanted; yet she, too, gave signs of feeling her chosen rôle a bit too genuinely for art.

"You might have talked Mama over if you had agreed to some responsibility in taking care of him," Richmiel brought out, *sotto voce* but with vigor.

"Don't regret it, Reesha," said Barnaby.

She replied: "I regret nothing." It was impossible for anyone else to measure the coldness of her glance. When a Prospect group came by, Richmiel laughed up tenderly at Barnaby with a little *moue* and a sigh; acted the wife; aped the motions of one in a successful relationship, her veiled look at the Prospect group a master look of: "You see us." When Oliver asked her to button his glove and she stooped to him, performed the service, touched at his collar, his cap, then it was as if from the child she

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caught something of reality, and acted for herself alone.

The Gideonite, anxious to get away to a Convention committee meeting, breathed *esprit*, said "My stars," clicked his watch. It was as if his only reality were this bright perpetual rôle of his. He had returned home early that morning for Sunday, for "the Sabbath," and had said: "I wish I'd known the little chap was sick. I'd have come home as tight as I could." He had not told what he would have done when he arrived, thus bursting in upon them, but his good will was beautiful, his loose-lipped earnestness. And now he had just presented Oliver with an antlered deer of felt, suitable to a child of lesser age. When Oliver told him facts in natural history regarding deer, "My stars," was the Gideonite's keen reciprocal. Tweet said low and proud to Richmiel: "He's always just exactly as you see him." And Richmiel murmured: "Incredible."

Pearl, in calf-brown, her long arms func-

tioning in locomotion, her gait betraying no goddess in her flesh—Pearl appeared to be in her usual unbroken struggle to present an effect of being a part of any scene in which she found herself. She played the rôle of playing a rôle.

“Why don’t the danged train come?” demanded Grandfather Crumb robustly. He stood peering up the track under his lean bare hand. His gaunt body was cased in an overcoat of buffalo, perhaps the only one remaining in Prospect. “If you’re going, might as well *go* then,” he shouted.

As if his strong willing had drawn down the train, it appeared. Already the moment held the connotation of a time past.

Leda looked little, cold, less than lovely. She felt the hand of Barnaby close over hers. For the first time she knew parting. About it there was no merciful sense of unreality. It was a terrible dilation of reality.

Four Crumbs, grouped outside the car window, tried to talk through the double panes, called Oliver “Blessed”; but Rich-

miel stood apart, eyes inscrutably downcast. Occasionally she forgot, and looked absently toward the engine or appraised the strolling Prospect groups.

Leda was following Grandfather Crumb down the red bricks. She heard the car wheels begin to turn. She did not look back. She thought:

"It is possible that I shall not go to Chicago—that Alice Lebanon will not want me. . . ."

"It's a hell of an old depot," said Grandfather Crumb, with wet eyes.

"If they repair it they'll never build a new one," Leda returned the trite Prospect phrase.

In the hall and living-room Richmiel's trunks yawned. And there were her beautifully colored belongings, and they so carelessly disposed that they lost the inadequate nature of garments and resumed the lovely estate of fabrics.

By a window Leda sat, sewing for Rich-

miel and watching for the post. The letter should have reached Alice Lebanon in Chicago three days ago.

"Cousin Leda is the one who ought to be going to California, really," Mama observed kindly; being kind to Leda at any expense of tact or the opportune.

"I may go to Chicago this week, for a few days," Leda now said.

They clamored. Crumb clamor. What in the world was taking her to Chicago?

The name of Alice Lebanon diverted them. They talked of her: Artist. Not much of an artist though, they opined, since she was said to paint only village pictures. And she was so queer; didn't she get a job as janitor of her building for that old Prospect chap who had once had an eye shot away by a jealous husband and who for twenty years had been known as "Lover" Strong? That was all they wished to know about her.

"The woman was Effie Lumley," Tweet put in. "They say since she's a widow Strong comes back and hangs around there."

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But she won't look at him now she's in mourning for her husband."

"Would your father have liked you to have anything to do with a woman of *that* stamp?" Mama inquired confusedly, heavy black brows arched, head at one side and gently shaken.

"I don't know, though," said Tweet. "Your father had one of Alice Lebanon's pictures in the parsonage parlor. But then he even approved of Barnaby."

Richmiel stood up among her beautifully colored belongings and said: "Don't say 'Barnaby' to me. Didn't you notice how stodgy and deadly he's grown? And how he. . . ."

To escape this Leda went to the passage to look for the post. And there was Pearl, moving uncertainly about, although the passage was chilly. She flushed, laughed, muttered something about a letter for the postman.

On the floor of the upper passage sat Grandfather Crumb: He had found there a

rug of great thickness, known to Prospect as a "fluff" rug, and upon it he diligently polished his bright coins.

"Wait," he said when he saw Leda.

He toiled to raise the bulk of his splendid shattering body. Incautiously she put out a hand, felt his recoil, his repudiation.

"I can," he said with dignity.

In the gas jet of that upper passage there was no burner, and the smoky stream of flame rippled and fluttered on his face, his impenetrable and intent face.

"You go to Chicago," he stated in some strong excitement.

"I hope to go. May I bring anything for you?"

He whispered: "I want to go, too."

"Oh, but wait until it's warmer. Wait until——"

"No." He was trembling. "I've got the money. Doctor says go. My eyes hurt me. Don't see good. He says go. I've got the money."

"You mean to see a doctor there?"

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He fumbled in a pocket, brought out a paper: "That one."

She divined that the family did not know or they would have talked of this daily. To suggest now that they should know would be a spiritual intrusion greater than her offer of physical assistance.

"I was going," he said with that faint importance, "but—kind of thought—be nice to have some company."

"It would be fine for me, too," she said now. "Yes, we can go together."

His face brightened beautifully. He said nothing.

"I'm sorry about the eyes," she added. "You have just found this out?"

He mumbled, flushing: "Might be six weeks."

She understood that he had dreaded to go alone, dreaded the loss of self-respect in asking anyone to take him.

"We'll have a gay little trip in spite of the eyes," she said, with her grace of casualness. "We'll have tea somewhere together."

He settled his shoulders, nodded. "Don't you tell them parrots I'm going, though."

She heard the lower hall door open, heard the voice of the postman. As she descended the stairs she stopped in fixed surprise. Duke Envers had stepped into the hall, had seized and kissed Pearl, who also seized and kissed him; and he was leaving in his own loud laughter.

Leda would have retreated, but Pearl came running up the stairs. When she saw Leda she laughed as if in vexation, said: "Did you see that? *Isn't* he the worst?" thrust in Leda's hand the one letter which she carried, and ran on to her own room. She was breathing heavily, and her face was no less than irradiated with light.

"Pearl," Leda thought, "Pearl, too!"

It was with Pearl's emotion as much as with her own that her hands trembled as she opened Alice Lebanon's letter. It was written from a distant city. At its first words Leda saw her plan die and come to new birth. Alice Lebanon regretted that she was

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obliged to remain away until the Sunday. But she would return toward noon on that day. In the meantime would Leda not use the studio as her own? She was instructing the janitor to give her the key.

On a background of confusion belowstairs concerning the finding of Richmiel's purple cloak, the golden prospect sprang.

PART III

FAINT PERFUME

VIII

THE high fireless room was in dusk. The green drugget caught late light from the sloping north window; gave to the room its only color. But the glass was warm with the scattered pink of clouds on a still lively blue.

At the summons on the door some tide of Leda's being literally changed rhythm, no physical current's recession but a lovelier alteration. To its measure she crossed the room. But at the threshold waited only Strong, "Lover" Strong, the janitor, once of Prospect.

This man was enormous. Shoulders, chest, girth were those of Cyclops. A black iris burned in his red face. The other eye was hidden by a leather patch, black, and as large as a saucer. It covered, too, the terrible furrows plowed by the powder about

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the socket. No one in Prospect had ever questioned the husband's right. The miracle, they said, was that "Lover" Strong had kept his bare life. Now he was forty. For twenty years the single act had defined him.

"Anything you want, Miss Perrin," he said, not as a question but as one making an offering.

She greeted him whom since her little girlhood she remembered, a lonely figure on Prospect main street. He asked sombrely about Prospect folk. When she told him that later Grandfather Crumb would be at the studio, the red face did not change, but the voice lighted: Mr. Crumb was a man with a heart and might he see him, "for a jerk," when he came in?

"Things are as usual with you?" she asked with her assent.

He answered: "Eh, I'm well used to living."

He went away with the tread of a land leviathan. She heard his great voice booming down a shaft. She thought: "He's a

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lion, trapped twenty years ago in a village, as usually only women have been trapped." She thought of Tweet's words: "They say Strong still hangs round Effie Lumley since she's a widow. But she won't look at him."

Strong's appearance shadowed Leda's high spirit. Save for that shadow she waited in a time stripped of externals. Her whole contact with life was now her momentary expectation.

Barnaby's step in the hall, his touch on the panel, lit her to shining life, as if some inner being arose in an experience of its own. As she opened the door it was this being who shone in her.

They met without a word. Into each face came relaxation as of two who have been running and have reached the goal. Rest. They smiled, stood silent, withdrew their hands quickly as if that contact were overshadowed by another contact.

He swung out of his coat, flung it away, emerged huge and animative. He was like

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a bell which has sounded and still gives out detonation. His seeking eyes, his large nervous hands, the fabric and fold of the flawless clothes carelessly worn had their appearance of an independent existence. He seemed more than one man and his selves all incarnate. Yet he spoke like a little boy:

“I’ve been wretched. I’ve been certain you wouldn’t get here.”

“Nothing could have kept me away.”

He scrutinized her almost as if she were unconscious of him, and his “I beg your pardon” carried no conviction that he cared what she had said. He seemed not to need her words, rather to be feeding upon her voice. When she repeated them he answered:

“That’s Ajax—defying lightning. Life breathes—once—and we’re kept away for good.”

And having taken first her voice and then her mere words, something of their meaning reached him. He cried: “Oh, could nothing have kept you away, too?”

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In their moment of silence she thought: "This is living as I've never known it could be." It appeared that she was no more concerned with his words than he with hers.

At length he said absently and rather to himself than to her: "I didn't think you looked like this."

"I really don't know that I do!"

"But it's another face than the face I've been thinking of." He spoke as if it were understood between them that such had been his occupation.

"My poor face. Is it much worse than you feared? . . . but don't bother with that unless you can tell the truth."

"You are some way—more. Principally you are different. You're probably magnified by every day—some people are."

She weighed that and then recalled: "Alice Lebanon used to say to me: 'You don't look like yourself *any* of the time.'"

This he did not hear either. He asked: "You came down comfortably?"

She told him of Grandfather Crumb and

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his touching assumption of leadership. He would be there shortly; she had left him with the oculist, who was to order his cab. She said: "When he's in town he's another being."

"He's free of the family," said Barnaby, and then cried: "Why, of course. That's why you're different."

"No. It's because I'm with you."

He heard that and met it with a look that was tenderness, as wide as light, specialized to relationship; and said: "I expect it's only some of you that is ever in Prospect at all."

"It's only some of us that is ever anywhere, isn't it? We're hidden people—all of us."

"Oh, hidden, yes. But you, they won't let you be hidden, there in Prospect. Don't I know? Your life there must be the very devil." He brought it out savagely, and when she began her reply he added brusquely: "Nonsense. How is anyone to survive talk which leaves one physically faint from its unconscious breaches of de-

cency?" He spoke as if some abrupt exhaustion had seized him, the exhaustion, say, of memory still coursing in him like experience.

She felt no surprise at his speaking so to her. It was they two against them all now.

He leaned on his hand, his eyes turned to the dusk of the room: "If you could see yourself there, in the midst of that violence. . . . To you indelicacy *is* violence."

At this her honesty troubled her own delicacy. She said: "But it's possible to get the color of that sort of indelicacy, isn't it? I can't do it, but isn't it possible?"

"I'm afraid I miss it. The damned ineptitudes those people don't even know they make—color in those?"

She spoke with her occasional inimitable hesitation, which gave to her speech, when it came, a quality matchless: "Well, I mean trying—not to see all the humor. And not to be superior and feel sympathy for them."

"You dear—you dear. . . ."

"No, wait! Those are of the spirit, they're simple. But irritation is in the flesh, like

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spiders walking over. That's not so simple. And I'm horrible. Sometimes I answer them with a calm that's no less than devilish. Sometimes I use a soft answer in a mean way——"

"Good God, that's what I mind. They take your very exquisiteness and turn it into flaws."

"It's I," she insisted. "It's because I can't transpose quickly enough. Can't transpose into their key. But the only time I ever shouted at them was when I came home from my walk the night you'd arrived. Do you remember? Just as I came in the door?"

He shook his head. "I don't think your shout could register. I remember only the heavenly careless stillness you brought with you."

"If ever I answer them in their own coin——sometimes I dream of doing that, like falling over a precipice."

"You may. Anyone might. That's why

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I should hate it for you even if I didn't love you."

This he brought out as if it were something long known to them both. The words carried no quality of confession; in them no sense of entering a new place. He did not even look at her. He added: "You knew that."

"Yes," she said, "I knew. . . ."

Barnaby stretched his arms about her and held her and he laid his head upon her breast. "Let me be here." He was quiet, as if in some deep exhaustion beyond emotion, beyond breath. He said: "I wanted this, when we talked there in Prospect. I could have died for the rest in one moment of it." And again: "You're what a man wants. You're woman-love and more. What is it . . . are you God?"

When they kissed each other it was still in that overpowering quiet. Some intense spell was on them beyond anything which either had known that emotion has to give. He said: "I'm so used to you! I've held

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you like this forever. It's eternity. . . . It's your breast that I remember."

She thought of the savage fatigue in which he must long have lived to come to her in this rapt exhaustion. Not the boy but the child was here, the very little child who might from her literally draw life and being.

"Forgive me . . . I've not thought of you. I give you nothing . . . I've nothing to bring to your life but my own life broken. . . ."

She cried: "You give me myself. You are myself." And added in wonder: "Why, when people say that, it is true!"

They sat silent. Consciousness as they had known it, low and dense, seemed abruptly outgrown. In its place came a deeper delicacy of awareness. Something of the unknown extensions of love bordered upon their common awareness: the body of that love the touch of whose vestment alone is high earthly bliss. Only love's body yet, her spirit veiled for a race to come, yet ray-ing through these two. For once he said:

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"I want everything of you—but now I have you as if we were running through light, and as if we couldn't bother—till we get home!"

"Home, Barnaby—with you. . . ."

"You're such a thing of Paradise, I wondered, in Prospect, if you were conscious of sex at all. Good Lord, it's only one of the things you know about! You've a thousand contacts with love. . . ."

Faint flashings of that which love might be. In all the influences released about them, of a few they had some divination.

And they had that hour, safe, immortal; broken now by a summons at the door.

Leda rose to answer and saw how dark the room had grown. About them shadow and substance lay inert, without presence, as if they two were all that was ponderable. Where the wide north window stretched there was only a blue white flow. She had taken no account of the switches or the lamps. She opened the door upon the room in its darkness. And a great voice said:

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"I'll lay ye a fire on the hearth, Miss Per-rin."

Lover Strong came in, with wood. His enormous bulk went down like a load of earth before the fireplace. He began to talk. He said that there was something about anyone from Prospect which always did him good. "Home-like little town," he said, and sighed. Leda found her way about, and two lamps sprang into color. Now to Strong's powerful kneeling figure the black patch toward the room imparted the look of a creature with face half hewn away.

"Prospect has a certain beauty," Barnaby said.

Hearing that voice, Lover Strong swung about on his knees and first became aware of another presence. It was as if the black patch itself briefly glared and comprehended. Then he drew his match across the grate and the wood threw up thin streams of orange. Without another word Strong

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rose to leave the room. But as he passed Leda he muttered:

"I'll watch out and keep the old man down with me a spell, Miss Perrin."

At this terrible sympathy she trembled.

Strong was not able long to detain Grandfather Crumb. He arrived shortly, neat in his black suit, the unaccustomed line of cuff and collar dignifying him. The curling hair, blown, gave to his head an appearance of great size. His body was tense and erect. He cried out in a return of some manner long lost:

"Now then! I come here on a bee-line. Fired out of a gun I couldn't have come any straighter. Hello, Powers! Thought I said good-bye to you. Where's the little fellow?"

He was being cared for at their hotel, Barnaby told him, and caught the old man's wistfulness. Grandfather Crumb now dropped his playfulness, became as dignified as youth. He sat down, leaning forward,

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hand on knee, elbow outward, in a vigorous pose which Leda had never seen him take.

"Going back on the seven-ten," he announced.

"But they don't expect you!" Leda cried.

"Then I'll kick the door down. Can I smoke in this cay-thedral?" He drew from his pocket pipe and tobacco which they had never seen him use. "I scheme to smoke the whole two hours going back," he observed; was caught by the fear that this announcement was trivial, and frowned. Through the smoke of his pipe he looked out, relaxed and at ease. Leda hesitated to lower that high consciousness by asking him what the oculist had said. When she did so his reply was almost jaunty: "Something with a long name. Says make up my mind to be blind. I don't believe him. Smart young fellow. Likes his big words." Something absorbed him more than this: "Outside his window," he went on with animation, "was a chap working on top of a steel frame. I use' to be a builder——" He talked of having been

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a builder. It was to be seen that he was a builder still.

He rose, settled himself in his top coat. "Don't help me," he said to Barnaby. To their offer to go to the station with him: "Much obliged—no. Strong has to go down that way. I expect he's hanging about somewhere now, waiting my motion." He glanced about the room in an importance almost genuine.

His eye was caught by a portrait of a woman near the door, and she painted in surging sun which she transmitted. His face changed profoundly.

"Looks like——" he said before it.

"Like the one you call 'the lass Grandma'?" said Leda.

"No," said Grandfather Crumb, and stood there, looking. A mountain of a man, before a portrait of a woman, and he remembering something.

Lover Strong came knocking. There was, he apologized, just time to make it. Grandfather Crumb looked at Leda.

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"You're coming back home?" he asked doubtfully.

Barnaby cried: "Only for a day, to get her belongings!"

The old man looked stricken. "I see how it was with you folks," he said. "But what'll *I* do now? Eh, I'd ought not to think of that." He straightened. "Glad you're going to get away from them parrots!" he whispered. "Come along, Peter!"

The two went away, Ralph Crumb and Peter Strong.

As she closed the door Leda was caught by the aspect, in the different light, of the walls hung with Alice Lebanon's monotypes.

"Look!" she said. "It's Prospect."

The walls were windows into Prospect. It might be two score of monotypes—Prospect all: The Square, the Point, the Ridge, the little streets. She whispered, as if she might be overheard:

"Barnaby. I can't believe I'll get away. Strong—and then Grandfather—and now the whole village."

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He held her. "What day can you be back here? Couldn't we be married by day after to-morrow? Couldn't you get back? . . ."

Dinner was to be sent to them there and spread before the fire. Barnaby was to bring Oliver from the little hotel where a woman was caring for him. He and Oliver had made no visits, Barnaby confessed; had merely gone to the nearest possible address to Alice Lebanon's studio and had waited.

As he left her Leda said: "Last night at this time we didn't know."

"Yes, we did!"

"Yes. But this is better."

"So much better—so sharp that I can't bear to leave you for an hour. It may all go away and you with it."

"I shall not go unless you send me."

"Send you? I send you?"

She pushed at him fiercely. "Be quick!" In her voice was that which was in her face.

She put on her white gown of lace, soft

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and old, her only finery. The two hours had wrought in her an extraordinary change, as if it were true, as Barnaby had said, that some hours magnify their creatures. This difference Barnaby had realized as no difference in her, but as her own deepening fulfillment of his expectation, that expectation, never stilled, which had been always in his heart, never known or named or relinquished.

She sat on the green drugget before the fire. Now the north window was black and shot with stars. Her body sang. She felt herself a gay stranger while some changeling, incredibly intimate, took her rôle. Her eyes rested on a sketch of Prospect bridge, but it was like any bridge—no power over her now! She tried to remember herself in Prospect, and there seemed nothing to remember.

She arranged the little table with Alice Lebanon's cloth and candles. Three covers. She thought: "Years and years. Three covers." She was in some extension of all that

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she had ever been. Everything seemed of extreme and unsuspected significance.

When the telephone sounded she did not at first attend. It was Alice Lebanon's telephone, and nothing that it could say seemed of any moment. But as it rang it came to her that this might be Barnaby, that something might be wrong with Oliver. She ran to answer and in frozen surprise heard the voice of Orrin Crumb.

"Leda? That you, Leda? Look here. Is Pearl with you?"

She repeated stupidly: "Pearl!" Who was Pearl?

"You've heard nothing from her?" he persisted, at her negative. "Well, she's gone. Left home. We know she came to the city—look here. I guess we'll come right up there now."

This she had not the will to withstand. Pearl! And who were "we"? Who was it who would be "right up"? Oh, Tweet and the Gideonite *now*? But she knew what had

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happened to Pearl. She remembered Duke Envers in the passage.

When at once there was a knocking she half expected to open the door and find Orrin and Tweet there on the instant. But Oliver ran in; and Barnaby's arms had her.

"The first time you've welcomed me home. I can't let you go even for two days. Make them send your things. Or buy some more and come with me now——"

"Barnaby," she said, "Barnaby."

She told him. He groaned, said that Pearl wasn't worth the spoiling of their first dinner together. "She is *not*, my darling. Well, of course, she is. No, I'm damned if she is."

"*I* want," said Oliver with dignity, "to build my town."

He carried a box filled with houses. These he emptied on the rug.

"Wait, Oliver," said Barnaby; and to her: "Do you want me to stay? Will it be awkward for you?"

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"I always want you to stay. But will it be awkward for *you*?"

"I don't care if it is. I want to be with you."

"I'll have to tell them anyway, when I go down to-morrow."

"Let's tell them now!"

"I want to build my town," Oliver reminded them.

"Go ahead," said Barnaby, and sat by the hearth.

"At least," said Leda, "we must wait dinner."

"You won't have to ask them to stay?"

"They won't stay. They'll be indignant, when they hear about us."

"Indignant? Why on earth should they be?"

"It's their only way of emotion."

"Let's not talk about them!"

She drew him to her with: "The first grown-up day of my life when I've been happy."

"Are you happy?" he demanded search-

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ingly. "You—yourself? Not just because I am? How do you know?"

"You tell me that. It's your business. All I know is that I sing in every cell."

"It's too great for me, or for biology either, for that matter. It's a force." But as he held her in those currents which were like silver wire shaken by light wind, he changed that: "Less a force than a fragrance," he said.

In the midst of emptying his box of its houses Oliver came to his father and leaned against his arm.

She met Barnaby's look. In the swift maturity of their love they entered now some momentary fire of domesticity; as if domesticity might be not an arrangement but a fact in nature.

IX

AT the expected knock Oliver darted to open the door; it was impossible to say why, unless an elf lived in him.

They heard: "Upon my word!"

The room received the onslaught of a family. Of Aunt Tweet; of Uncle Orrin, saying My stars! Of that one whom Oliver had not yet called grandmother; and of his mother.

Oliver felt no surprise. Everything was more or less a dream which might open upon anything. But three of them kissed him, and he was irritated and said to his Uncle Orrin: "You let me alone, will you?"

Three of them had kissed him and then stood staring over his head at Barnaby. Richmiel, who had instantly discerned Barnaby, stood like a wax lady and said to Oliver in her rich staccato:

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“What are you doing here?”

“Whee!” said the Gideonite. “*Whee!*”

Leda was trying to take their hands, their inert and flaccid hands; and Barnaby came and stood beside her, his own hands in his pockets.

“Why, this is very useful,” he said. “It’s going to save some letter-writing—usually a silly occupation. First tell us about Pearl.”

At this Mama found breath. Mama had sunk among the couch pillows, a parched lily.

“Oh,” she said rapidly, “we never knew it till ’most ’leven o’clock. Then I went in and nobody was there. She must have gone in the night. If only she got up earlier mornings we’d have missed her quicker. I always told her it was wrong. Oh, I don’t know what her father would say at my not taking better care——” Pearl might have been in baby clothes.

Tweet said, sisterly: “It’s that Duke Envers. Pearl has *no* sense. We thought she might have got you to help her off, Leda.”

"No," said Leda only. "No." Barnaby saw the clear glass of her instantly become misted in this muggy air.

"Ree-grettable," said the Gideonite, and shook his head. "But *I* say, let her go. She's got her own life to live. How do *you* come to be still here, Barnaby?"

"You're glad to be rid of her," Mama sobbed absorbedly. And the Gideonite, not perceiving that this was the truth, looked at her coldly. Tweet said: "Mama, I'm sure . . ." in complicated hauteur.

"There's nothing to do," said the Gideonite, and spread his hands. "Absolutely nothing. I told you that before we came up here, on expense. No sense in coming. But you would do it."

Richmiel's first words were her neat and involuntary rebuttal: "I," said she, "had some shopping."

During these passages she had stood consciously impassive, looking nowhere; and she sustained an even smile. This was not for Oliver, to whom she now said: "Come

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here, my darling," and sank to a chair, an arm about him. Her size, her strength, her brooding head manifested the mother. Her body played the mother.

"You decided," she said to Barnaby, "to delay your sailing?"

"I did," he answered, "yes."

"You told me you had your sailing!"

"I cancelled it."

He turned and looked at Leda, who was regarding him as if his look had been expected. "I may tell them?" Upon them all his voice in this undertone was electric. And at her assent: "Miss Perrin," he observed conversationally, "is to do me the great honor to return with me."

As if touched by the same control the eyes of the Crumbs went to Richmiel. And Richmiel threw up her head with an impulse which seemed to flow down her body: The lifted head of the wounded creature.

"In what capacity?" she asked.

"As my wife." Barnaby's voice was without color, without flaw.

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Tweet's "For heaven's sake" and the Gideonite's "My stars alive!" bubbled, touched and burst. And, "Mama!" Tweet called. "Did you hear? Barnaby is going to *marry* Cousin Leda."

Mama, galvanized, sat up among her pillows with her look of detachment from any context.

"He can't," she said, in intense indignation. "Not yet he can't. What do you s'pose people would say?" She seemed to stare less with her eyes than with those heavy black eyebrows lifted high. And considering that Prospect still believed Barnaby and Richmiel to be in wedlock, the question had for her its point.

But it was not of Prospect that Richmiel was thinking. This that she was thinking gave to her face new values in line and shadow, a sinister solidity as if it were compounded of the vegetable. Her voice came like a missile:

"In that case I shall take Oliver with me."

Barnaby had an elbow on the arm of the

bench where he sat, his hand covering his mouth; and now he looked at her meditatively. It was as if Leda had taken the wound in his stead. She said, very low: "Richmiel! You wouldn't do that."

"I would," said Richmiel. "Any mother would. Do you think I'm going to give my boy to another woman?"

"I should think *not*," came out of Tweet with exceeding emphasis.

"It wouldn't be," Leda said, "giving him to me—no. His father would have him for a time, as you have promised."

"I didn't promise him for a time to his father's second wife."

"I should think *not!*" Tweet re-uttered shrilly.

The Gideonite leaned and spoke to his wife from one corner of his mouth. "Don't *you* get into this. Don't jangle."

"My child shall go with me to California."

Mama, following one and another with her eyes and her head, quavered: "Well, but Reesha—it'll be an awful expense, your cart-

ing him around to all the big hotels. And he eats like a horse."

"My child shall go with me," Richmiel said.

Tweet clasped her hands: "Why not let him go home with *us*?"

"Nonsense!" Mama brought it out hard. "Let Barnaby have him, seeing you promised."

Leda came to Richmiel and stood beside her. "It's a fact," Leda said, "that you have promised."

"I've promised him to his father for a few months. Not to you." Richmiel's eyes narrowed in the opaque setting of her face. "You can know nothing of what it means to a mother. I can think of my boy with his father—his father is his father, after all. But to think of another woman—of you, doing for him all that I have done for him all my life—I can't do this. No one ought to ask me."

Leda stood looking away from them all. Instead of being lifted by excitement, she

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seemed to be lowered, almost to suspend her breathing.

"She has reason," she said to Barnaby.

He said nothing; but rose, stood with his arms at his sides in the attitude of a man from head to foot vulnerable and exposed.

"Come, Oliver," said Richmiel briskly, "you're going with *maman* in the train. I suppose he may have his things. . . ."

Oliver sat building his village, streets and tiny houses, fences and garages, trees and a green. The place might have been Prospect. He cried: "Are you going with my father and me on our train?"

"Bring your coat, dear—bring your coat."

"Father! Is she? Going on our train?"

Leda said low to Richmiel: "You promised him. You promised the boy that he should go with his father."

"He may go with him still."

"If I do not go?"

"If you do not take my place with my son."

In that moment it was as if Leda with-

drew from her body. But from a deeper place her voice came: "Barnaby . . . you see. . . ."

That use of his name seemed to fill Richmiel with another energy and the words to give her desire. She said to Barnaby:

"Have *you* nothing to say?" And abruptly and terribly she used the tone of her old allurements, a rich and running tone.

He spoke quite kindly: "Not to all this, for I simply cannot believe it of you, Reesha."

"You've believed of me those things which you should not believe and you've left unbelieved—I assure you it's all true. The boy goes with me, with me, with me! Do you see? And now I've no more time. Oliver!"

"Richmiel!"

She looked at him, her head thrown back, her beautiful throat and lips offered to his eyes. She said gently: "Yes?"

"You can't do this thing."

"Can't keep my baby—no? Not this boy

for whom I went through a hell or two—not keep him from another woman? Oh yes, but I can!”

“From me,” he said. “From me.”

“You. It’ll be hard for you, yes. There’ll be nights when you two are sitting there together on your Swiss balcony that his father will wish for the boy’s voice and his arms and his lips—no? And you!” she cried to Leda, “remember that when a little while has passed he’ll hate you for having stolen from him——”

“Be quiet!” Without movement Barnaby smote her to silence. His face was now intensely pale. “With that you have no concern. Your whole concern is with your own action. Are you capable of this?”

“What mother that is a mother is capable of giving up her only child——”

“My friend,” Barnaby said, “I understand you perfectly. Let’s have no play-acting. Let’s have truth.”

“Your truth or mine?”

“Truth! I want the boy with me. You

don't want the boy with you; you know that you find him in your way. Will you go to this inconvenience merely to stand in my way?"

She murmured: "I'm a mother . . ."

"Remember, I read you, Richmiel."

". . . the boy may go with you. But he shall not go with both of you."

"Remember, too, that our separation was arranged between us—the 'desertion' arranged. There's no real reason why you should have the boy more than I——"

"The courts, the courts! And then you gave him up."

"It is true that I love him more than I knew. I love him. I want him."

"And you shall have him, but no woman shall have him. Don't hope to move me!"

By her attitude, her coquetry, she might have been denying him herself.

Now the Gideonite intervened: "Oh, look here. Can't we all remember the Golden Rule?" His own recollection he applied to his face like a paste. "Don't let's jangle."

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They ignored him, but Tweet found his hand.

Richmiel sprang up. "We shall have no dinner—darling, your coat! Perhaps you'll get his coat for him, Leda."

"I don't think," Mama said, "that I can eat a mouthful of anything myself. Little dry toast, maybe—or no, milk toast. That always agrees with me. But oh, I just can't go off and leave Pearl——"

"His trunk," Richmiel continued placidly, "you can express. Leda, *please*, his wraps!"

Leda stood as if she had not heard. She met Barnaby's eyes. They looked at each other. It was as if they exercised together a faculty of the race of to-morrow, as if they read each other's essence, replied, flowed together in understanding. They smiled, gray light touching gray sky, and turned away.

Oliver ran to his father. He was trembling, a curious and terrible vibration of flesh and breath. "Is maman going on our train?"

"No, dear, no," said his father clearly.

Faint Perfume

"Am *I* going on your train?" It was the cry of a tiny animal, at night.

"Yes. You are going on my train."

"What is that?" Richmiel cried sharply.

Now his words came as if they were wrung from him, bit by bit:

"The boy will go with me."

"On my condition?"

"On your condition."

She came near to him and stood with bent head, her look slanting up to his face. "You have never lied to me."

He said nothing.

"No. You never cared enough for the feelings of another to lie. I don't think you are lying now. And Leda, she's so good! She wouldn't double-cross a kitten. Very well then, I'm to leave him?"

"You are to leave him." He took a few steps up and down, caged.

"Darling! Then everything is changed. Come and kiss *maman* good-bye!"

Torn by he knew not what, played upon

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by the hidden violence in that room, Oliver burst into passionate crying.

"Doesn't want to leave his *maman*?"

"I want my papa!"

"You're going with him, *mon petit*."

"You going on our train?"

"Now let me tell you something." All Richmiel's charm was in her voice. "We're all going in different trains. Papa and Cousin Leda and I—all going in different trains. Isn't that funny?"

In his tears he laughed out. "Yes, that is funny. And my train is my papa's train."

"You and papa. All alone."

Mama, with her hat on crooked, said: "That's a sensible decision, I'm sure. And Leda has a good home with us, where Pearl——" She wept.

Seeing those tears, Richmiel swept down upon her mother, took her in her arms, cried richly: "Mother darling, don't; why, don't! You have us, you know. . . ." The strength and beauty of her tenderness were dazzling.

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For that space the goodness in her breathed, then slept again. "Are we all ready?" the earthly Richmiel imperturbably demanded.

There were the stir of their preparation, their good-byes, their admonitions to Leda in case Pearl should communicate with her. "I certainly thought you helped her to get off," said Mama, "and could tell us something. You sure——" she added, and it was Orrin who flushed and hurried her out, crying: "Come on, Tweetsie!" Tweet had used the interval to examine the walls, her nose tilted critically before the monotypes. When Orrin grew impatient, she said: "Well, I don't get the chance to see so *very* much art."

At the door Richmiel ran back. "Leda, when you are happily married to someone else—when you are a mother—then at last you'll understand me now!" She crossed before Barnaby and cried: "*Bon voyage*, my friend!"

He closed the door.

In all that light with which they had

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drenched the studio, Leda looked worn, old.

Barnaby came to her, dropped his hands on her shoulders:

“What have we done? What have we done?”

X

IN his arms, shaken from her serenity which had seemed inviolable, she became to him incredibly more dear.

“You wouldn’t have had me do anything else—let me hear you say it.”

“You know.”

“Let me hear you say it! You think I was right?”

“We know you were right.” But at their rightness she wept. Her abandon shattered him. And whereas she had been a fulfilment, she became a need. He cried:

“But now—now we go our own way.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I know that we have promised.”

“I’ve put myself and you in an iron cage,” he said harshly. “But aren’t we to see each other through the bars?”

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She waited dumbly. They were on the stone bench, remote from the fire. A lamp whose shade had fallen glared in their faces.

"What did *you* think we were to do?"

"I think," she said in her clear voice with its inner tremolo, "that you're going to Switzerland and I'm going back to Prospect."

"You think I could bear that!"

"What else—what else?"

"You must come to Switzerland."

"Switzerland!" She looked as if she had secret knowledge that there is no such place.

He went on, not as one proposing a plan but as one working out the details of a plan already assured:

"I know a *châlet* in an orchard above Gersau. The people are lovable. They'll care for you. We can see each other every day."

"You mean——"

He turned upon her savagely. "What earthly difference does it make what I mean, if we love each other?"

"But our promise——"

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He sprang up, and the control which he had used when Richmiel confronted him cracked like an enamel in which he had been cased.

"Is that one relationship the only thing to be considered?" he shouted. "Is that uppermost in our minds—is it? Can't I speak of our being together in the Republic of Switzerland without that one relationship entering in?"

His air was one of fury, but he was beautiful. And as his eyes met hers he sank at her side and said:

"If you'll come there and live with my friends the Mirans in their cottage and let me talk to you for five minutes a day in their door-way, I'll call that relationship enough."

"Barnaby." She compelled his quiet. "I wasn't thinking of us at all. Do you understand? Not of us in the very least. I couldn't go to Switzerland in any case."

"Money? I've enough for us—I've enough."

"Money? No! Why, Barnaby—it's Oliver, isn't it?"

"He will be with us."

"But Richmiel——"

With difficulty he came back to Richmiel. "All that she says is that you shall not have the boy."

"And means that I shall not have you."

"And me, yes; in marriage. Surely she can't control my friendships."

"But the family would know where I'd gone. It would lead to her taking Oliver away all the same."

At this the child cried out: "No, no!" and left his village, came and clung to his father, thrust his head beneath his father's elbow; and, the arm having closed about him, the little head looked out securely, a tiny animal in covert. He turned his head delightedly, laughed, looked round. Barnaby seemed hardly conscious of him.

"Leda!" For the first time fear was in his face. "You couldn't send me away without you."

"What else?" he barely heard.

"Have you no need of me?"

Her answer, rising to no words, was invested with her utter need.

"Then come with me now. We'll sail together—what does it matter? What does anything else matter?"

"My dear, we've said what we're to do. We've told her."

"But the whim of a selfish woman!" he cried violently. "If she can keep me from marrying you, that's all she wants. She makes of Oliver an excuse—well, I'll take care that you never see Oliver. It's I whom you'll see. . . ."

She drew away from him, looking so small, so worn that her body seemed emptied of her.

"It isn't the marrying that Richmiel cares about. It's keeping us apart. She has only to know of our being there together and she'll have back Oliver, at any inconvenience to herself. You know that, Barnaby."

Some current in him seemed arrested, re-

versed, stilled. "Yes," he said, "I do know that." Then he cried: "You feel all that might be; you feel as I feel. Leda! . . . The infinite *rest* of kissing you. Do you understand at all that you aren't only you? You're truth and tenderness. You're my only hold on the loveliness that could be life. Not just love; loveliness. There's the Third, the God in love. Through you I can touch that. . . ."

Briefly, brush of a moth in the dark, she caught the grace of spirit in a man's love. Spirit trying for spirit, murmuring through the ancient mask and gone again. To this she spoke:

"It's all life and death; it's Oliver and more than Oliver that we're concerned with, isn't it? We can't bother—about that one relationship just now—can we?"

Her words created about her and about him new air, as if they were dealing in some art of impalpable stuffs. Through that new medium he looked at her, and his own voice

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caught her magnificent casualness, that casualness of exquisite taste in any crisis:

"I don't know that we can," he said.

Dinner had been brought in and stood unregarded. The fire was out, the room was cold, the lights burned about them like socketless eyes.

There would be a half day before Alice Lebanon's return, on the Sunday at noon. They would see if the night brought counsel where both knew that no counsel lay.

In his rough coat, with Oliver in his arms, he swung round for another good-bye, still holding the child, who stirred sleepily, grunted like a puppy. The studio door squeaking open revealed Lover Strong, piling logs outside to feed their hearth fire. He stared uncertainly after Barnaby, leaving.

Leda sat on the green drugget with Prospect watching from the walls; Waterworks Tower in Trees, Pumping-station at Night,

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Power Tower on the Island. On the floor was Oliver's village.

Deep in her as in cells long formed her course lay waiting to be followed; but in her mind a later and lesser functioning went on in argument. There the whole case roared and ran, a denser consciousness to which now she gave herself. She thought of it as common sense. She had no doubt; there was a vocative, inner, outer, final. Yet in the morning and with parting upon her, that later and lesser functioning might control.

At midnight the telephone rang. She ran to take the rough depth of Barnaby's good night. She heard the broken piping of Pearl.

". . . Cousin Leda. I don't know what . . . could I see you in the morning? Could I? How early could I come. . . ?"

"Come now."

"Now? In the night?"

"I'm alone and up. Come straight here."

"I'm afraid."

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"Shall I come to you?"

"No, no. . . . I'll come. I'll come now."

Leda built up the fire, stroked the room, arranged the untasted dinner. She wandered about and examined the monotypes. Her mind went on: Alice treats the village as if it were free, unanchored, ready to rise into another medium. As if it were in another medium now. . . .

Now it was as if her mind had nothing to do with the hour, were outdistanced; as if the cells of the body and the reaches of the spirit alone were involved. Emotion and a new dimension. Her mind admitted that if anything played her false, it would be neither body nor spirit, but her mind itself, crying common sense.

She expected Pearl to arrive in tears, to sit with wrung hands. But when she came she wore an odd rag of self-possession, importance.

"You know, Cousin Leda, I came up here to be married. That was to be to-day. But something was wrong about the license.

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And to-night Duke hasn't come back. . . . This letter came just before I telephoned."

To Leda's eyes there was no doubt about the intent of the note: The license, Duke wrote, might take much longer than he had thought; he advised her to go home, would write to her there. Pitifully plain, but on Pearl there sat some of Tweet's own assumption of complacency. "I can understand his being kept away."

"Pearl," said Leda, "I think you would better do as he says—go back to Prospect and wait."

"I can't go back until I'm married."

"What will you do here?"

"I might work. . . ." But she had never worked in Prospect, and her voice trailed away. "It'll be for only a few days, of course."

Leda told her how long it would be; listened patiently to her defense of Duke; was patronized as knowing nothing of men; told her: "But you can wait there at home with

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them——” and was cut off by Pearl’s passionate reply:

“I’ve had them long enough. I want him.”

And as she said this, about her there lay a sweetness. Not Pearl, not Duke Envers mattered here; something else entered: The rose of an infinite expectation. Leda said no more, was patient through tears, awkwardness, the pathos of the ill-equipped, in love.

“Maybe I could go back with you,” Pearl sobbed at last. “When are you going back?”

Leda thought: “This makes it sure.”

She said: “In the morning, early.”

She lay looking at the black north. Suns were crossing the glass. These poised in the panes, swung into space, were gone. She thought of that other procession, from town to Prospect: On the six-ten Grandfather Crumb, Ralph Crumb, empty. On the eight o’clock Mama and Tweet and Orrin in endless talk; and Richmiel, bland and

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burning. In the morning on the seven o'clock train, Pearl and herself, vessels of turmoil. All going down to Prospect. To the Waterworks tower and the Pumping-station and the Power Tower on the island. Prospect receiving all the wounded, and having no oil. Procession of suns. Procession of beings.

Toward morning she wrote to him. In her tenderness lay the austerity of her knowledge: ". . . the boy is more than I—that is nothing but commonplace. We dare not risk her taking him, molding him. Some day. . . ."

She went through with Pearl's inevitable daylight reaction, return of confidence, decision to stay, her actual assumption of wifely proprietorship in Duke. But Pearl listened to her, wept, and they caught the seven o'clock local. On the train Leda felt weighted, thickened, as in the presence of the Crumbs. Already their vapors were in her breath.

And on the train was Lover Strong. When he passed and she spoke to him, he

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muttered: "Seeing you folks made me homesick. It's my vacation, only I didn't know what to do with it. Thought I'd go on down for a jerk——" In his monstrous face she saw his feeling. Shipwreck; and over him a wind from old spaces. But Pearl would not speak to Lover Strong, turned and tossed her head.

The people entered and left the car: Honey Creek, Rocky Run, Wild Rose, Eureka. At Eureka six boys and girls entered, and the six all sat in a double seat. They were breathless, oblivious, unabashed. One said:

"What you trying to do, Winnie? Get a thrill?"

Leda thought: "They're laughing at it! This that has held the world captive, already they're laughing at it." She looked at Pearl and Lover Strong and thought: "They're both of yesterday." And, "I'm of yesterday, too. Barnaby's of yesterday. Who of us has yet seen for a moment the reality of love?"

XI

SHE had assumed that Pearl would tell the truth to the family. Leda found that the truth had not occurred to Pearl in this connection. With aplomb born of her adventure, she stepped into their midst, announced that she had gone to the city for a day's shopping, "and I didn't say anything about it because you all object to every earthly thing I do." They fell upon her, shook her scanty rag of fact, and nobody but Mama believed her. Mama believed, enfolded; rebuked Tweet and Orrin, who were in audible doubt; rebuked Richmiel, whose smile was even and terribly sustained.

Pearl they received, but to Leda they said nothing. The Gideonite alone remained human. She thought: "Now I am actually glad to hear him say: 'Well, well, well, *well*, Cousin Leda!' "

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She asked for Grandfather Crumb and was told that he had not been down that morning. He had still been about when they returned the night before, she heard, and had told them something of his visit; but not, she divined, of its object. She had a sharp divination, too, of his effort to give them bits of his adventures. "Yes, yes, Grandfather. Now it's bed-time."

"He's getting clumsy," said Tweet. "Last night he broke his water-pitcher."

"Cried over it," said Orrin. "I told him it didn't matter, guessed I could afford a pitcher or two; but he took it to heart. Made me feel bad."

Orrin was in the throes of preparation for the Gideonite convention, to open at noon that day. As he tried to set Leda at her ease, to joke with Pearl, and as he rushed away to his committee, it came to Leda that Orrin was literally dear to her.

She went to the trunk room. There was no answer to her summons. She unlatched that door. The room was clean, scrupulously

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ordered, the wind blowing smartly in at the open window. The wind caught and fluttered a paper, weighted by bright quarters, in the middle of the bed.

She read:

“Canal. By the cotton-wood.”

There was other writing, straggling down the page; but she knew. She ran out at the alley gate in the trodden rutted snow. She had not cried out to the family; this seemed to be her affair. One or two men she saw and did not call, as if she had been running in a nightmare and at a word they might turn and pursue her. She went unevenly across the snow of a lawn, gained the canal and the towering glittering cotton-wood.

He lay face downward in shallow water, partly beneath the trampled ice. He had tied his arm to a stake so that he should not wash away and make for anyone trouble.

When she returned to that straggling writing, Leda read:

“Canal. By the cotton-wood. Blind in a year. Can’t take care of my room much longer. Have broke the water picher. Good bye all. Good bye Leda. Shiny quarters for the little chap.

“R. CRUMB.”

Leda was swept by desolation, by weeping. By the sense of death, of being, she was devastated. Life opened its garment, showed her cadaver, skeleton, dust.

The old *esprit d’occasion* of the Gideonite came upon him. “Why didn’t somebody *do* something?” he demanded, and spread out his hands, bending at the waist and out-bowing his knees. From him the family took contagion. Looking old, as if her flesh had inherited this new terror, Mama continually sniffed, and wetly. Tweet took the hour with hand laid flatly upon cheek. In them all was horror of death. Not of the loss, merely of death. Later in the day they remembered Pearl’s case. What in the

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world. . . .? They went from death to Pearl and back to death, making more drama even of drama.

Among them Leda moved and thought: "Now he has the letter. Perhaps now he is on his way to New York. . . ." She was sustained by no sense of rightness. She was desolate, without hope.

The house filled with neighbors. Enormous tribute was to be paid to the extraordinary, and the crown of the extraordinary was death. They called on both "remains" and relatives. The relatives received in the dining-room, told and re-told all. Women brought food. If they spoke it was with unwonted gentleness. And all were wrapped in some cold mist.

A haggard visiting Gideonite contributed: "I saw him on the street last night. Last night I saw him. Now isn't that odd? Asked him how he was. Scratched his head for the time being and said he was spry. He must have known——" His eyes became fixed. He was flooded with a trans-

forming sense of change. He became tender, wistful, a mortal entranced by mortality. He snapped his watch and said that it was about dinner time.

"My stars!" cried Orrin. "After all, isn't life odd?"

Again and again he caught and folded Tweet. They whispered together.

To Leda, who was forever recalling herself from the unwonted, forever emerging from some spell in which she had found renewal, the majesty of death seemed a familiar unfamiliarity; but Mama and Tweet were obscurely thwarted by these violations of routine, could catch no new rhythm, and as the day wore on became nettled. In an effort to seize on the commonplace in this unique hour, they resorted to the west curtain. Tweet would have it raised. Mama wouldn't have her rug all faded out. Tweet felt that the rug would be prettier not so bright. Mama had always thought her rug pretty—papa thought so, too. With an air of exasperation Tweet lowered the curtain

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on, Very well. Let's sit in the pitch dark. With an air of martyrdom Mama raised it: No. Let the rug fade.

Momentarily they met with open disregard the Gideonite's: "For cat's sake, don't jangle in the house of the dead."

Leda thought: "Now he has certainly gone. I shall never see him again." She tried to find quiet in the parlor beside Grandfather Crumb. But two shawled figures were there, whispering about gangrene. She came back to the others, sat with them mutely. Her faculty of mediumistic insight, of reading in an act more than the actor guessed, became her agony. To the horror of friction was added the horror of seeing the human spirit prostrate beneath the heel of its own flesh.

And abruptly Tweet's flesh prevailed over her faint spirit. She turned upon Leda:

"Going around so quiet, so lady-like, so innocent! Don't think we didn't see what was going on here all the time. Didn't we, Mama?"

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Mama wept: "I see it all now. Poor Pearl, with such an example. Oh, my baby. . . ."

Leda looked out distantly, as if from this she were still protected by certain veils, had not indeed received the full impact.

"When we took you in, do you suppose we ever thought of such a thing? And poor Reesha's husband, too. . . ."

Now Leda looked at Tweet with an air of death. At Mama, who uncovered reproachful eyes. At Richmiel, whose smile was even and terribly sustained. At Pearl, discreetly flaunting a new importance. With a pang as of the separation of flesh from spirit Leda thought that she heard herself begin to reply:

"You are killing me. You have killed me a hundred times since I have been in this house. Your way of life is death. I cannot die any more."

It seemed to her that she had a heavenly authority to command them to cease. Then she realized that she had not spoken at all,

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had not uttered a word—as if under the same authority. And that, if she did speak, that encasement, finer than personality, would fall away and leave her naked. She said only “I’ll go. I’ll go now”; and went from the room.

Loss of Barnaby; of grandfather, who alone had made the house bearable; bodily torture; idleness; the Crumbs. She was a point of pain in cosmic confusion. Common sense clamored at her to escape.

In the passage she became conscious that the telephone was ringing, had been ringing for some time. Mechanically she took down the receiver, heard a voice say a deep “Very well,” and another receiver click to place. This voice shook her. She cried “Who’s calling?” and the metallic tone of the operator countered: “Order, please. . . .” And to her own passionate “Oh, who was that calling?” there came only: “There’s no one on the line.”

She ran down the passage, turned into the

parlor. No one was there now save Grandfather Crumb. She stood beside the coffin in the majestic presence of the old man's body, and she did not even know that it was there. He was no more than the living. Nothing existed but the sound of that voice which she had just heard.

"Barnaby," she said aloud. "It was Barnaby. . . ."

Had he been calling from town? Was he there in Prospect? She turned back to the passage. On the rack hung Grandfather Crumb's overcoat. She caught it down, folded it about her, ran into the dry cold of the dusk.

The street which led to the station was empty. It was the Prospect supper hour. She ran between rows of houses starry on the twilight. Between these rows she discerned a far dark star which grew. She stumbled toward that approaching figure.

"Oh, you—you——" she cried into the gloom.

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Barnaby's arms came round her. She groped for his face. Her murmur rose to but a word or two. He did not hear her smothered:

"I'll go—I'll go!"

XII

THEY found the sill of a wagon shop, sheltered, withdrawn from the street. The wavering flow of a gas-jet lapped the snow of the pavement. No one passed; the town had diminished; there were no stars. In the dark gray of the air the world lay in some reality greater than form.

At first they had no more than monosyllables. No speech. The mind withdrawn. Body and spirit in their ancient silence.

"You came back—you came back——"

"I had to come."

No more than that to voice the incredible current.

At last: "I came to tell you, but I know that you know——"

She waited. Yes, she knew; knew that they were not to be parted; that she could

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no longer draw breath in Prospect. Common sense at last.

"We've begun to be in a different world, Leda. . . ."

"Yes."

"You understand that we do not part. . . ."

"*Yes!*"

"Last night I understood. When I'd left you. I tell you, love was different. I saw that we know nothing about it—no, literally!—until we have this that you and I have. I tell you that I saw it differently, bright and distinct. . . ."

She pushed at his hands. Quick, what had he found that would tell them with certainty to go away together? Some new common sense. . . .

But he said: "I think it was your casualness; as in the face of any other death. Your utter gameness. No cries, no struggling. You took our death, there in that room last night, like any other death."

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By that he drew her from her fever to the immensity of his meaning.

He went on, his hands cherishing her, the fountain of this that he had drawn to himself:

“But I who, I hope, could meet any death with you, on the sea, in any terror—cried out last night and begged you to sneak with me to cover.”

With that she came to herself, back to the self whom alone he knew. She murmured: “To-night as I ran to you I could have begged that, too.”

He groaned: “Don’t let me know. . . .” Cried: “Yes, tell me!” Held her and sat staring into the dark. She saw that vastness had brushed him in which her own violent impulse appeared a mere trickle; in which her quiet of the night before seemed nothing but effort.

He said: “A passion to be gratified. Good God, there’s the instinct to live, but we’re all ashamed to steal safety. Your way, your

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casualness—as if love were no more than life——”

In his words, far, like the call of a veery, clarity deep within clarity, she discerned the form of love. Reality beyond mating, beyond longing, beyond self; beyond that which we know as spirit. Fine flowing peace; the slow-breathing inner Her, the hidden one peering out. Faint perfume. The Self of love. Frail, evasive, she touched it with her thought and it was gone.

He murmured on her lips: “Yet I shall be dying for this. . . .”

“Beloved. . . .”

Broken talk, little of courage. Hidden beings, signing to each other.

When she walked with him along the street, the town of Prospect seemed to be withdrawn. They two were of each other, as voice within breath, as breath within being; and there was nothing else. Pain of love, to be sure, like a buzzing at the window. But beyond the window. . . .

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Before a grocery near the station they stood in shadow.

He said: "It can not be for long. She'll marry. Then she'll be glad to be finally rid of the boy."

"But if it is for long——"

"Well?"

She caught the utter security of his challenge to any future; echoed:

"Well?"

She let herself into the passage. That house received her like a smothering shawl smelling of funeral flowers. From the room where Grandfather Crumb lay came the voice of the Gideonite:

". . . a Bible in every hotel room. And on the inside cover these wholesome references: If lonesome, read Twenty-third Psalm. If in trouble, read John fourteen. If trade is poor, read——"

Leda's consciousness crossed some narrow border of awareness. In the flash of sense

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which pity or beauty brings, she saw the Crumbs, living and dying.

She joined them, moved among them as if nothing had occurred.

Even when Richmiel said:

“You know, I’m doing you a favor, Leda, really—saving you from Barnaby. It’ll work out so, you’ll see.”

(3)

THE END

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Gale, Zona, 1874-1938

Faint perfume



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